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# THE P. E. N. BOOKS

THE INDIAN LITERATURES

No. II

BENGALI LITERATURE

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1942

# THE P. E. N. BOOKS

The Indian Literatures—No. II

Edited by Sophia Wadia

for

The P. E. N. All-India Centre

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## BENGALI LITERATURE

By

ANNAD<sup>†</sup>SANKAR and LILA RAY

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## EDITOR'S FOREWORD

India is no exception in a world swayed by politics in an extraordinary measure. Her ruling passion is for freedom from foreign domination; in other countries politics revolves round other ideas and ideals, other hopes and aspirations. India has greater justification for being preoccupied with politics, for her servitude affects her indigenous culture on every plane. This has compelled even a mystic like Gandhiji to experiment with truth in the field of politics.

Mainly because of this preoccupation Indians have undervalued the literary unfoldment of the last few years in the different linguistic areas; if properly co-ordinated and helped, this would develop into a renaissance of the first order. Visions of literary creators enshrined in books of today are likely to become objective realities of tomorrow. Moreover, the mystical intimations of the poet, the psychological analyses of the novelist, the philosophical expositions of the essayist, the tendency portrayals and the character delineations of the dramatist—these are related to the very problems which engage the whole consciousness of the politician, the economist and the sociologist. India cannot afford to be neglectful of her literary movement of today.

India's many languages are not a curse, however much her enemies may call them so or her political and other reformers may wish for a *lingua franca*. Idéas unite

people and rule the world ; not words. Europe is not suffering because it has many languages, but because conflicting ideas and competing ideas have confused issues and have created chaos. Our many languages are channels of cultural enrichment. Many educated Indians are not familiar with the literary wealth of any Indian language other than their own. How many Bengalis know the beauties of Malayalam literature ? How many Tamilians are familiar with the literary efforts of old and modern Assam ? And so on. Again, India suffers grievously in the Occident, which is ignorant of the present-day literary achievements in the different Indian languages. No systematic attempt has been made to popularise the story of the Indian literatures or to present gems from their masterpieces to the general public in English translation. This is now being attempted by the Centre for India of the International P. E. N.

The plan of this series of books is a simple one. A volume is devoted to each of the main Indian languages. Each book is divided into three parts :—( 1 ) The history of the literature dealt with ; ( 2 ) Modern developments ; and ( 3 ) An anthology. There will be about fifteen volumes in all, and they are to be published in alphabetical order, which arrangement has been responsible for some delay in publishing the series. A list of these publications will be found elsewhere in this volume.

In editing each MS. I have kept to the transliteration of words from the Sanskrit, Arabic and Indian languages selected by the author.

I must thank my colleagues of the P. E. N. Movement

and several other friends who have helped with advice and valuable suggestions. And, of course, the P. E. N. All-India Centre and myself are greatly indebted to the friends who have undertaken to write the books which make up this series. Without their co-operation we could not have ventured on the project.

For me this is a labour of love. But time, energy and other contributions made bring their own recompense as all are offered on the altar of the Motherland, whose service of humanity will be greatly aided by the literary creations of her sons and daughters.

SOPHIA WADIA



## INTRODUCTION

The literatures of civilized countries embody so great a part of their cultures that it is generally forgotten that human culture antedates literature and that the latter is only a part of the expression and embodiment of the former. This is true of India, too, as of all other civilized countries.

Archæologists have preserved whatever remains of prehistoric Indian culture they have found or succeeded in discovering. Of ancient Indian culture in historic times there are evidences in architectural monuments, in sculptures and in the paintings in cave temples. But our greatest and most important source of knowledge of ancient Indian culture is ancient Sanskrit literature and Pali and other Prakrit literatures. Tamil literature, too, claims great antiquity. It is not the practice to divide Sanskrit and Prakrit works according to the regions of their origin; and, in fact, even if an attempt were made to assign particular ancient works to particular parts of India, it would generally or at least in great part end in failure. Ancient Indian culture as embodied in literature had, no doubt, its different epochs. Parts of Indian literature are also divided according to religion as Hindu, Jaina and Buddhist. Hindu religious literature is again subdivided into Vedic, Tantric, Puranic, etc. But there is, as said above, no regional division.

For these reasons, it is usual to take a substantially integral and undivided view of ancient Indian culture as embodied in the ancient Indian literatures. One need have a knowledge of only Sanskrit and Prakrit literatures in the original or through their translations or through works relating to them, to have some idea of ancient Indian culture as embodied in literature.

When one comes down to mediæval, and particularly to modern times, the task of forming an idea of Indian culture as embodied in literature becomes far more difficult. For the literatures of almost all the principal modern Indian languages, more than a dozen in number, had their origin in the mediæval or pre-mediæval age. In modern times some of these literatures have had remarkable development.

As Indians rightly claim to be a nation and rightly believe in the fundamental unity of India, they should be able to convince themselves and others that there is a reason for their faith. Leaving aside politics as outside the scope of the series of books of which the present one forms a part, Indian men and women of culture owe it to themselves to prove to themselves and to others the cultural unity of India. We mean unity in diversity. So far as the literary portion of culture is concerned they can do so by getting acquainted with the literatures of the modern Indian languages. But not many of us can master all or most of the principal modern Indian languages and become familiar with their literatures. There are, no doubt, English translations of some of the principal works in at least the more

developed Indian languages. But they are not sufficient to give one an adequate idea of the literatures of which they form a part. Some modern literatures, *e. g.*, Hindi, Gujarati and Kannada, have enriched themselves by translating books from other principal Indian languages. But not all modern Indian languages, Bengali for example, are rich in such translations. Besides, even if there were a sufficient number of such translations of excellent quality in the principal modern Indian languages, not many would be able to command sufficient leisure in these busy days to read them in order to form an idea of the literatures of languages other than their mother-tongues. Hence, we have to fall back upon books descriptive of the different literatures of India.

There are such books relating to at least some of these languages. But they are not written according to any uniform plan and many, if not all, of them are bulky and not moderately priced. The series of brochures relating to modern Indian literatures projected and being gradually published by the Indian P. E. N. Club, are written according to a practically uniform plan and are both concise and moderately priced.

From the point of view indicated in some previous paragraphs, these books are of national importance, and it is hoped that they will be looked upon as such. It may be thought that the books are much too small to give an adequate idea of the literature of any modern Indian language, not to speak of the more advanced ones. But we may remind ourselves that, though



English literature is both more voluminous and more varied than any modern Indian literature, some English authors, *e. g.*, Stopford Brooke, have written illuminating primers on it. The P. E. N. brochures need not, therefore, be considered utterly inadequate. They will serve a very useful purpose.

An idea prevails in some quarters that, though Bengali literature has made remarkable progress since the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the old literature of Bengal is meagre. That is a wrong idea. The published old literature of Bengal is by no means meagre or of poor quality. There are, besides, hundreds of unpublished manuscripts in the collections of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, the Calcutta University, and some other public institutions and bodies and many more in private collections. In my native district of Bankura alone, which has enriched many public collections, including the two named above, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of old Bengali manuscripts lying unknown and uncared for in many a village home. Time has been working havoc with them. To prevent such destruction and irreparable loss organized efforts should be made in all districts to collect and preserve, if not also to publish at least the most important of them. If there are ballads like the Mymensingh Ballads in districts other than Mymensingh, they should be collected and published. A fairly complete collection of Bāul songs and other folk-songs has still to be made. They continue to be composed.

Shri Annadasankar Ray, who, by-the-by, has made

his mark in Bengali literature as a novelist, poet and writer of essays on diverse subjects, has divided this ably and interestingly written book on Bengali literature into three parts, one on old Bengali literature, a second on new Bengali literature and the third an anthology.

In the course of his chapters on old Bengali literature he notes some points of contact and coincidence between the old folk literatures of some adjoining provinces, some stories and their heroes and heroines being common to them, *e. g.*, the ballads named after either Maynamati or Gopichand. Similarly the *Padavalis* of Vidyapati and some other Vaishnava poets are claimed by more than one province. These facts show that in the days when these poets and singers flourished there was similarity or partial identity of culture in the provinces concerned.

A far more important and potent factor in bringing about similarity of culture and character is to be found in the inspiring influence of the epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Truly has the author observed :—

Words can hardly do justice to the lessons of these two epics. They have enabled India to outlast waves of invasion, subjection and worse, and she is as young as ever.

An important point brought out by the author is the non-communal, or rather all-communal, character of old Bengali literature. Buddhists, Shaktas, Shaivas, Vaishnavas, followers of the Dharma cult, Nath Yogis, Muslims—all contributed to it, though, of course, their contributions were not equal in quality or quantity. Since the enemies of India's unity bank most on Hindu-Muslim differences, particular attention is invited to

the author's paragraphs on the old Bengali Muslim poets in Chapter IV.

As in the treatment of old Bengali literature, so in that of modern Bengali literature, the author has brought to bear on his theme independence of judgement and a thoroughly liberal and non-communal spirit. He seems, indeed, to be particularly anxious to do justice to Christian and Muslim authors.

Modern Bengali literature, like old Bengali literature, is the fruit of the labour of all communities in varying measure. The works of authors of different communities have been appraised in this book irrespective of the communities to which they belonged or belong.

Poetry and other forms of *belles-lettres* having æsthetic value, with which mainly the author has dealt in this book, spring from a deeper layer of the human spirit, if one may say so, than party politics. Hence, seeing that all communities bring their offerings to the Muses, it would not be wrong to conclude that at bottom India is one in spirit.

The progress of modern Bengali literature is not a little due to the fortunate circumstance that, leaving aside those who have devoted their mental powers mostly to the achievement of professional success, the intellectuals of Bengal from the days of Raja Rammohun Roy downwards have generally used their mother-tongue, in preference to any other language, for the enlightenment and the delectation of their fellow-countrymen through literature.

Of the future of Bengali literature it would be hazardous to speak. There is no one among the living writers of Bengal who even approaches Rabindranath Tagore. But that is no reason why we should be despondent. Seldom, if ever, are literary giants succeeded by compeers in any country. There is much talent among our writers of the younger generation. Some of them could do better work if they were not too much afraid of being considered guilty of writing like some older author—say Rabindranath Tagore. Conscious copying or imitation is bad. But neither is the craze for differing a virtue. All authors should fearlessly follow the bent of their genius or talent; or whatever else it may be called. If they be moved by an earnest and lofty purpose—unconsciously it may be, it need not be feared that from artists they will necessarily become didacticists. With all his serious purpose and earnest work in life Rabindranath Tagore retained his supreme artistry till the last. A present-day tendency which is to be deprecated is the fashion to classify authors according to their political, politico-economic, or socio-political *isms*, Marxism being the latest vogue. For in literature proper what matters most is æsthetic and emotional value, called *rasa* in Sanskrit.

In order to feed the springs of original literature, as also to bring the literary treasures of other countries within the reach of our people, translations are undoubtedly needed. But great care should be taken in selecting the works for translation. Time may be taken as a safe winnower and gleaner.

The anthology speaks for itself. The translations included in it are marked by literary grace. Owing evidently to limitation of space it has not been possible to make it more representative and adequate. Probably for the same reason the pieces and passages translated have been taken generally from works not yet translated.

The publishers' enterprise and the authors' labours will be amply rewarded if this little book leads some of its readers to read the works of at least the great Bengali authors in the original.

RAMANANDA CHATTERJEE

*Bankura, Bengal.*  
*20th June, 1942.*

## AUTHORS' FOREWORD

This little book has been written for the common reader by two of them. It does not lay claim to scholarship. All it hopes to do is to arouse interest in its subject.

The text has been written by A. S. Ray with the help of his wife and the translations have been made by Lila Ray with the help of her husband. The pieces have been chosen to illustrate the variety of Bengali literature. They are not fully representative, nor are they always the best examples of their authors' work. But they are characteristic. The limited space at our disposal made it impossible to give more than one selection from any author.

A word must be said about the dates of the authors mentioned. The medieval ones are controversial and those of the modern period have not been given in any reference book and we have not the time to ascertain them by correspondence.

For the poems and prose extracts included in the anthology our grateful acknowledgements are due to the late Rabindranath Tagore and the Visva Bharati, the executors of the late Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (through Shri Uma Prasad Mukherjee), the heirs of the late Kamini Ray (through Sir S. N. Ray), the widow of the late Satyendranath Datta, Shri Pramatha Choudhury,

Shri Mohitlal Majumdar, Kazi Abdul Wadud, Kazi Nazrul Islam (through Shri Gopaldas Majumdar), Shri Manindralal Bose and Shri Bibhuti Bhusan Banerjee.

For the Suggested Reading List we are grateful to Professor Priyaranjan Sen in particular.

A. S. RAY  
LILA RAY

*Judge's House,  
Bankura, Bengal.  
14th July, 1942.*

DEDICATED  
To  
SHRIMATI SOPHIA WADIA





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# BENGALI LITERATURE



## Chapter I

### THE BACKGROUND

The Ganges, the great river which the whole of India venerates as a goddess, is more than that to us. She is the mother who, with the silt gathered on her way through the rich plains of Aryavarta, has built and is still building our fertile alluvial soil. Bengal is the youngest part of India and as islands emerged from the primeval sea, slowly linking themselves together and to the mainland, they drew colonists from all points of the compass, from Tibet and Nepal, from Burma and Assam, from Chhotanagpur and Gondwana, and from Aryavarta itself.

At a time when the continental part of India was still, for the most part, unconscious of her existence, Bengal was fashioned from the waters of its mightiest river and peopled diversely. Men met and mingled on her shores, giving an impetus to her genius which has been renewed continually throughout her history by a steady influx of new ideas and new blood. Her sons took to the sea instinctively, establishing trade relations with all the larger islands in the Indian Ocean and carrying the culture brought with them from Northern India as far as the East Indies. It is said that Ceylon (Sinhala)

owes her name to Vijaya Sinha of Bengal.

Her mixed origins and extra-continental contacts put Bengal beyond the pale of Vedic civilisation. She played no conspicuous part in the legendary warfare of the *Mahabharata*. In recorded history her first appearance is as a Buddhist country visited by the famous Chinese pilgrim, Fa Hien, in the fifth century. He embarked for China from Tamralipta, a seaport in south-western Bengal. Today it is Tamluk and new land has forced the sea to recede. Nearly the whole of Bengal's long seacoast is closed to navigation today owing to the gradual silting up of the delta. Chittagong is the only port still open, a living link with the past. Even Calcutta is not a seaport. It lies on the dying River Hooghly and the ninety-mile journey up from its mouth is made dangerous by changing currents, sand-banks and quicksands.

Perhaps it was this slow shrinkage of a navigable sea-front which made Bengal turn more and more to Northern India and think of establishing a position for herself there. In the eighth century King Dharmapal of Gaur (in Malda District) marched with victorious armies across Northern India and thereby made the presence of Bengal felt. He was a Buddhist but the form of Buddhism then prevailing had little of Buddha in it. It was full of gods and goddesses, mostly Tibetan. When Hindu kings replaced their Buddhist predecessors in the tenth century the Brahmans adopted these deities and incorporated them in the Hindu pantheon. For example, the name of a Buddhist goddess, Vajreswari, had become "Vasali" on the lips of the common people. The Brahmans, ignorant of the true derivation of this

word, traced it back to "Visalakshi," a Hindu goddess of an entirely different character. The protests of the Buddhist monks, if any, were rendered ineffective by the advent of the Muslims in 1199 A. D., who disposed of the few remaining monasteries. Whatever other difficulties they experienced under Muslim rule the Brahmans were left free to Sanskritize the speech of the people ( which was a branch of Magadhi Prakrit ) and to Aryanize their names. The process still continues to this day. As long as they had their share of the spoils of Buddhism the Brahmans allowed the Muslims to effect mass conversions in regions outside their sphere of influence. There was something in this new religion which concorded well with the traditional Buddhist way of life. The people were born to a democratic social system and were not particular about caste. The Brahmanic teaching was based on the ascendancy of the Brahmans and they forbade seafaring, divorce and beef-eating to which the Buddhists had been accustomed.

The Bengali Mussalmans, of whom the majority are cultivators, weavers and boatmen, have retained the original Prakrit speech with a minimum admixture of Arabic and Sanskrit words. They have remained, like their Buddhist forefathers, Bengali to the core. The oldest folk-tales we have are to be found only among them in comparative purity. The Hindus have either forgotten them or so interlarded them with Sanskritic modes of expression and Brahmanic paraphernalia that they are unrecognizable. In this sense the Muslims have been and are better Bengalees than the Hindus. Broadly speaking, barbers, washermen, goldsmiths, carpenters, workers in bell-metal, shoe-



makers, grocers, oilmen, potters and blacksmiths are invariably Hindus. With the exception of the weavers, who are to be found in both communities, it appears that craftsmen were less attracted by Islam than the peasants. The seafaring lascars are all Mohammedans, but the boatmen and the fishermen are largely Hindus.

Throughout the Muslim period educated Hindus held high official positions. Nearly all bankers were Hindus ; they gave loans to the rulers and took their reward in land. Even some among the Brahmans, though the majority lived modestly upon revenue-free lands given them by wealthy Hindu landlords, learnt Persian and served as officials. A few, winning the favour of the court, secured huge estates for themselves.

The whole province, it must be noted, was not reduced to submission by the Muslim conquest immediately. Sporadic rebellion persisted. Occasionally Muslim chieftains themselves revolted, joining hands with Hindu rebels. It was at best a complex state of affairs and the confusion was worse confounded by the arrival, in the sixteenth century, of the Portuguese pirates who raided up the estuaries, looting ruthlessly and carrying away slaves. They were followed by the English, the Dutch, the French and the Danish in the seventeenth century.

While these various invaders fought and squabbled for booty the bulk of the population remained passive, quietly pursuing their traditional arts and crafts. To them the greatest event of the times was the birth of the saint Chaitanya who taught the power of love. He set at naught the Brahman orthodoxy of Navadwip, breathing into fresh life the purest spirit of

Buddhism. Men and women of all stations, including Mussalmans, gathered about him and lived in an ecstatic atmosphere of equality. His fame again made India Bengal-conscious as Dharmapal had done, though in a different way. His travels were in search of God and he covered the major part of the peninsula. Chaitanya's disciples are to be found in places as far away as Gujarat and the Northwest Frontier Province, singing still Bengali "kirtans." Brindaban and Puri where he lived and passed away have been favourite resorts of Bengali Vaishnavas. In Benares also, though it is not associated with Chaitanya, the Bengali Shaktas have a historic colony. •

Strangely, Navadwip, that was and has remained the centre of Brahman orthodoxy, was also the hub of the movement inaugurated by Chaitanya. It has thus played a dual rôle. From its Sanskrit Schools (Tols) young men returned to their homes all over the province to teach there in similar schools the scholastic systems of law, philosophy and logic. At one time the Tols were more numerous than any other schools. Before the nineteenth century they monopolised higher education among the Hindus. Bengali literature grew up in their shade, under the stern frowns of the pundits. Prim and proud, they burdened the young growing limbs of maiden Bengali with cumbrous and ill-fitting Sanskrit ornaments.

But the Navadwip of Chaitanya was there to counteract this restrictive influence. His movement was of the people and it was to them that their poets looked for response. Affiliations with Brindaban, however, did a disservice. A language that was neither Bengali nor

Hindi, but a mixture of both, became the fashion.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, when Calcutta had established itself as the political capital of the province, cultured society slowly gravitated to it and it became the literary capital also. Since then it has dominated Bengali life and letters. But the standard Bengali that had been evolved under the influence of Navadwip remained the prevalent medium of literature throughout the province. It is known as the "Sadhu bhasa," or speech of the élite, and has little in common with the living speech of the people. Modern writers, particularly Pramatha Choudhury, have broken away from it because of its rigidity and artificiality, but the essential problem remains where it was a thousand years ago. "Chalit bhasa" or the speech used by the polite society of Calcutta, which has replaced the "Sadhu bhasa," though much more elastic and natural and vivid a medium, still does not go far enough in the direction of a standard speech which the common people of all districts will recognise and use as their own. As a matter of fact, no one knows exactly how to set about creating such a speech, for local dialects are many and vary from district to district. Yet the growing desire for a people's literature cannot be satisfied until such a medium is evolved. "Chalit bhasa" originated in Calcutta where the life led by the city dwellers is so remote from the rural atmosphere that it is idle either to attempt to reach the hearts of country people with it or to hope to express their minds and emotions through it with any degree of truth. Not perhaps until our cultural life has become decentralised and regional capitals spring up around us will such a

language become feasible.

Meanwhile folk literature in all parts of the province has gone its own way unhampered since Buddhist times. The dialect of each locality is its medium. Thus in Chittagonian we have songs about fish, elephants and politics. I did not understand more than a few words but enjoyed the lovely melodies. The gramophone companies have popularised the Bhatiali songs of the Padma boatmen and they have discovered the Bhawaia songs of the wandering minstrels of Eastern Bengal. Closer familiarity with such spontaneous efforts of the people themselves may help us in the creation of a people's literature and speech, without sacrificing the Sanskrit connection of a thousand years' standing.

Our cultural foundations are unmistakably Buddhist and Prakrit. The surnames of many Bengali Hindu families to this day are proof enough of it—Ghosh, Basu (Vasu), Mitra, Sen, Gupta, Datta, De (Deva), Pal, Rakshit, Palit, Nag, Sinha and so on. It is incredible that some or all of them came from Kanauj in the tenth century, as many claim. There is no trace in Kanauj or any other part of India of such surnames except Gupta. A small number of Brahmans may have come from there but the way they have multiplied would suggest that they intermarried freely with local priests of Buddhist extraction.

The analytical intellect which is a characteristic of Buddhists has been cherished and developed in Bengal. It has specialized in a system of dialectic called *Navya Nyaya*. Our best scholars have been agnostics even without the aid of Western philosophy. The esoteric side of Buddhism has survived in the Tantras

which have always held an attraction for certain sections of the educated. Adventure-loving and progressive, changeful as their changing land, erratic as their rivers, the comparative isolation of their province has given the Bengalees a certain insularity of outlook and feeling. They are sensitive and, aware that they are regarded by the older aristocracy of Aryavarta as upstarts, they retaliate with the arrogance of youth. They play with ideas, accept them easily and discard them without a pang. Eternally busying themselves with the new and bright their most stable characteristic is their youthful and exuberant vitality. Their minds are as fertile as the silt that has built their land. Innovations carry them away and there is an annual display of new magazines and institutions of all kinds.

The people as a whole, however, have not taken kindly to industrialism, though it is fashionable in Calcutta drawing-rooms. The mills, factories, dock-yards and railways are manned chiefly by non-Bengali labour. Neither have the collieries and tea plantations attracted them in large numbers. Perhaps the reason is that they are unable to adapt themselves to industrial conditions. Another and, to my mind, more consoling reason is their ingrained individuality. Every Bengalee prefers working under his own roof at his own craft or on his own land. And he prefers it even when to do so means that he will be the poorer thereby. The home instinct in him is strong and local patriotism lively. No matter where he roams he dreams of the green and gold of his native land, with its rice fields and lotus ponds and flashing waters.

## Chapter II

### THE VAISHNAVA POETS

Once I heard a mendicant Muslim woman singing :

Love when you have learnt the meaning of love.  
Love is not a mere word. Choose a teacher.  
Chandidas and Rajakini were the crown jewels of love.  
They were one in death....

This indifferent translation can hardly do justice to those beautiful lines, but my purpose is to introduce the great Vaishnava poet, Chandidas (fourteenth century), with whom our literature truly began. I heard a similar song in another district, this time from a mendicant Hindu woman. Chandidas seems to have captivated the heart of rural Bengal first as an ideal lover and then as a poet of love.

He was, so far as can be gathered, a temple priest who learnt the meaning of love from a Rajakini (a washerwoman) named Rami. He was excommunicated by his caste and lived the hard life of a wandering singer. The Lila of Radha and Krishna was the theme then in great vogue all over Northern India. Jayadeva, who composed in Sanskrit, Vidyapati who wrote in Maithili and Mirabai who sang in early Hindi, were not exactly

contemporaries of Chandidas but they belonged to the same age of mystic love in which it was glorious to be alive and to be young was very heaven. Chandidas, who had his own *sadhana* of love, found it a theme after his heart.

His "Radha" is not a phantom of delight who plays with love and is crossed in it. She is a mature woman so helpless before her passion that she loses all happiness. She has given herself without a thought of the morrow, renouncing her comfortable social position and sacrificing her reputation, all for love. Yet her lover fails her in the end.

Who says love is good ?  
I loved that I might be happy,  
And I have been crying all my life.

This is her plaintive cry. Chandidas reunites her to her beloved, contrary to legend, in an eternity of "Bhava-Sammilana" which can be freely translated as spiritual union.

Though he idealised Radha and Krishna as lovers Chandidas did not deify them. It was as human beings that they figured in his lyrics. Strictly speaking, he was not a Vaishnava but a Sahajia. There existed at that time an esoteric cult known as the *Sahaja*, a term implying ease. It was a mysterious form of Buddhism, differing from other ascetic cults in that its devotees lived in couples, practising the delicate and restrained art of ascetic love. Men and women were comrades in spiritual discipline, believing that the greatest self-control could only so be attained. Theirs was an affirmative creed, accepting life and seeking to control it

through controlling themselves. Many were called and few chosen. "Everyone talks of *Sahaja*," exclaims Chandidas, "but who knows what it means!" Despite its name, it was about as easy as plunging into water without getting wet or making a frog dance in a snake's mouth.

Chandidas as a priest had served a Buddhist goddess, Vasali, which indicates his Buddhist affinities. There are Sahajia poems attributed to him which are intelligible only to the initiates of the cult. One of these opens with the noble lines,

Listen, brother men,  
Man is the highest Truth,  
None is higher than he.

Similar lines are to be found in the songs of the Bauls about whom I shall write more under "Folk Literature." There appears to have been in this province a strong undercurrent of humanism from time immemorial. The *manush* or "man" of these mystics does not set himself up against the *Sain*, or Lord. God is in man's image. "In this man is that Man," sings the Baul. Man contains Him in himself and therefore is the human body sacred, a veritable place of pilgrimage where one can attain salvation.

Few were the loving pairs who came unscathed through the fiery ordeal and were hailed as pure gold. Rami and Chandidas were one such pair. Legend has it that the two met their death beneath the roof of a pavilion which collapsed over their heads through the machinations of a prince who was jealous of the feeling his princess cherished for the inspired minstrel.



For simplicity, sweetness and pathos Chandidas is unrivalled. His songs go straight to the heart. For five centuries people have wept over them and about a hundred years after his death Sri Chaitanya, the great Vaishnava saint, incorporated them into the sacred literature of his sect. His *Padavali* which contains his lyrics on Radha and Krishna is popular to this day. For the most part the poet's audiences were composed of unsophisticated villagers who gathered round him in the evening after their day's work in the fields or followed him from fair to fair. He sang to them of his love with candour, vigour and a directness of diction born of the soil. But as a craftsman he was excelled by both Jayadeva and Vidyapati, whose works are faultless in form and in composition.

Vidyapati, though a Maithil, is traditionally regarded as sharing with Chandidas the honours of old Bengali literature, in defiance of geography and philology. The Maithili language was akin to Bengali and people in those days were unspoilt by a misguided patriotism. Vidyapati's writings were eagerly read in Bengal and some Bengali poets, aspirants after a vicarious immortality, even adopted "Vidyapati" as a pen-name. It was a custom of the time which subsequently gave rise to some confusion. There were a number of poets writing under the name of Chandidas also.

The influence which Vidyapati (fourteenth century) exercised over Bengali thought and letters entitles him to a place in the story of our literature. He was a learned Brahman of Mithila who became the court poet of Raja Siva Sinha in the same region (North Bihar). Legend has it that he felt for the Rani "the desire of

the moth for the star"—a fact that did not prevent his being a friend of the Raja. Like Chandidas, he sang of his love as the love of Radha and Krishna. His Radha is a young immature maiden half in love with her own charm and half in love with the handsome cowherd. They revel in their happiness but at last he begins to weary of her. They quarrel and are reconciled from time to time. At length he comes of age and forsakes the pastoral delights of his youth to win a kingdom for himself and rule it. Distracted with grief, Radha pines away and lives in her memories of the past. They meet again in eternity.

Vidyapati reveals himself in these poignant lines:—

Since my birth have I feasted on beauty,  
Yet my eyes are insatiate.  
For ages have I pressed heart upon heart,  
Yet mine knows no peace.

Worldly and sophisticated, he lacks the spiritual insight and the emotional depth of Chandidas, though he compensates us with his marvellous command of metre and his exquisite diction. His delineation of beauty in all its forms stamps him undoubtedly as a great master.

After Kalidasa, Vidyapati seems to have most influenced Rabindranath Tagore. These three great Indian poets are in the same tradition though their languages differ. The natural beauty of India, the seasons with their characteristic flora, their birds and beasts, their clouds and zephyrs, their sunshine and moonlight and rain, permeate deeply the creations of all three.

Chandidas and Vidyapati were equally popular in

Bengal and poet after poet followed the one or the other. They became known as the Vaishnava School of poets. Almost invariably they took the surname of Das, or servant of God, and were very devout Vaishnavas. Some were stern ascetics. The best known are Jnandas, Gobindadas, Balaramdas, Narottamdas, and Raysekhar. To them Radha and Krishna were divine and they regarded Sri Chaitanya as the incarnation of the united pair. The delighted and delightful lovers became the masculine and feminine principles of the Universe.

Jnandas ( sixteenth century ) was a simple, unpretentious soul who found his master in Chandidas. He composed his songs in a Bengali as unaffected as it is moving, with a sincerity and a spontaneous grace that made him Chandidas's worthy successor.

Gobindadas ( sixteenth century ) took Vidyapati as his master, wrote in his style and imitated his language. He is rumoured to have been a Maithil also and in the skill with which he manipulates metre and chooses words is second only to his illustrious predecessor. If he sometimes sacrifices sense to sound, his work is full of sensuous beauty. The poets who were Vidyapati's followers evolved a poetic dialect of their own called Brajabuli which is eminently suited to their theme and enchanting to the ear.

It will be a mistake, however, to regard either Jnandas, Gobindadas, or their fellow minstrels as individual poets. The Vaishnavas had formed separate communities of their own and their poets, drawn without restriction from all castes, became the voices of the

community as a whole, more or less obliterating their personalities. There were many of them, including some women and some Mussalmans. The Padas ( the general name by which their songs came to be known ) ran into hundreds of thousands. They were composed in the traditional forms and confined their subject-matter to the traditional cycle of themes centering about the Lila of Radha and Krishna and opening with a hymn to Chaitanya. There was, however, ample scope for variety and the love of man and woman, symbolizing the love of the soul and its Creator, was portrayed in all its subtle moods.

All the Vaishnava lyrics were set to music and sung at their festivals. The manner of singing became so characteristic that these songs came to be regarded as a distinct type of musical composition and were called "Kirtans." Kirtans are to Bengal what the Bhajans are to other provinces.

Inspired by the mystic vision of the Divine Lovers as mutual Creators of the Universe in their ecstatic dalliance, men and women, following the example of Chaitanya, left their homes and wandered over the country singing their way to Brindaban, the Eden of their dreams. Some settled in sacred places as married couples with the option to divorce at the will of either party. Some were roaming ascetics. Turning their backs on society, refusing patronage, unmindful of the priests and careless of the caste elders, they sought their salvation in a mystic union with the Divine whom they thought of as a lover. There is no humility or self-abasement in their songs ; they do not beg favours of any exalted being. Their god is their playmate and as

such their equal. They feel no compulsion to beseech him for earthly blessings. More fervid, more devout songs are perhaps not to be found in any religion.

## Chapter III

### THE SAKTA POETS

In a land which annually experiences the terrible as well as the beneficent aspects of nature it was inevitable that the Śakta cult should predominate, though the Vaiṣṇava tradition is deep-rooted. Floods, famines, pestilences and the depredations of wild beasts are as familiar as they are fearful to the Bengalees. Nature appears to have their country and its people at her mercy, utterly in her power. Fascinated by her dread beauty, Bengalees worship her as Kali and seek to appease her wrath. She is a fury, a whimsical termagant, whose mad orgy of destruction is only arrested when Siva, her husband and the symbol of welfare, throws himself down in her path and she inadvertently treads upon him.

Nature as a goddess is Sakti, or Power, exercising over men an authority which is comparable only to that of a tyrannical mother over her babe. She is therefore the Mother before whom men tremble, yet whom they love. Out of her fertile bounty she gives them the wherewithal to feed, clothe and house themselves. She nourishes and sustains. She is Durga, or Chandi, the Protectress who, by slaying the buffalo-

demon, saved men and gods from its ravages. She is Lakshmi, the bringer of prosperity; she is Manasa, the queen of snakes; she is Saraswati, the giver of knowledge and the arts; she is Sitala, the goddess of smallpox; she is Shasti, the bestower of many children. But always she is Sakti, Power, and the Mother. "Bande Mataram," the famous song which has become the national anthem of all India, is addressed to her. Literally it means, "I adore thee, Mother!" Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the author of the song, regarded his country itself as a manifestation of the Universal Mother in the best Sakta tradition. There was at one time a rivalry between the Siva and the Sakti cults. The former was deeply entrenched in the minds of the men and the latter made its way through the superstitions of the women. A legendary merchant prince named Chand Sadagar, a devotee of Siva, refused to bow before the goddess Manasa. In order to humble him she conspired to bring about his ruin. One by one his sons died and his treasure-laden ships were sunk. But the defiant devotee of Siva still refused his allegiance. At last a compromise was effected; he consented to worship both deities. His sons and his boats were then restored to him. This ending symbolises the synthesis between the two warring cults.

The story of Chand Sadagar is better known as the Behula legend. Behula was the wife of his seventh son who died of snake-bite on their wedding night. Placing the corpse on a raft she took her place beside it and floated down the river. Temptations tried her sorely but she clung resolutely to her lover even after his body had begun to crumble away. Ultimately she reached the

court of Indra, the King of the Gods, where she danced before him and received as her reward the restoration of her husband's life. The beauty of this story has inspired countless poets to write about it. In the villages of Bengal the story of Behula is still acted or sung, a favourite with all classes. The poets Vijaya Gupta (fifteenth century) and Ketaka Das (seventeenth century) are probably the best on this subject.

The goddess as Syama or Kali has inspired many among her worshippers. Chief of them was Ram Prasad Sen (eighteenth century) whose songs address her as the Divine Mother. Their distinctive melody has made them known as "Ramprasadi" and they are as popular as the Kirtans. Like drops of blood from the heart of a great sadhaka to whom Kali the Terrible has revealed herself as the Madonna of the Universe, a vision which is the supreme realisation of the Sakta creed, they are passionate and stirring. The great saint, Ramakrishna Paramahansa was as fond of them as Chaitanya was of Chandidas's lyrics.

While Syama has been addressed as Divine Mother, Durga has been welcomed as Daughter, the daughter who comes to visit her parents for four days once a year and then returns, amidst tears, to her husband's house. These songs are sung at the time of the Durga Puja, the Christmas of the Bengali Hindus. They are comparable to the Christmas carols.

As Chandi, the goddess has appeared in dreams to a host of poets. Her power and her mercy are illustrated in the tales of Kalketu the Hunter and Srimanta the Merchant. Kavikankan Mukundaram Chakravarti (sixteenth century) was unquestionably the best writer



on this subject. He was a born story-teller in verse, a humourist of a high order, a close observer of men and things, and one who could draw on his own rich experience of life. His characters are alive to this day and you can meet them anywhere in rural Bengal. Bharu Dutta, the hanger-on, and Durbala, the maid-servant, are among the immortals of all fiction.

When I was a little boy Kavikankan's *Chandi* was read nightly at our house. Sometimes I was called on to do the reading. It was read in a singsong, the listeners sometimes repeating a refrain. When the goddess appeared to save the boy Srimanta from execution by the order of the King of Ceylon, whither he had gone in search of his father, a prisoner there, we intoned at the end of every line, "Oh, how great is the name of Durga!" At the end of the chapter we would chant, "Once taken, the name of Durga removes all sorrows. Oh, how great is the name of Durga!" Sometimes the last half of each line was repeated by the audience before the reader proceeded. When the storm clouds were seen on the horizon his voice trembled with apprehension for Srimanta's ships. "Clouds loom in the northeast as thick as hair! Oh, as thick as hair!" When the rivers rushed from all directions to swell the rising flood the audience broke into a chorus of lamentation, "Hai-re, Nai-re, Hai-re!"

Just as Chandi manifests herself in order to save Kalketu and Srimanta so also Kali comes to the rescue of Prince Sundar whose nocturnal philandering with his beloved Princess Vidya is betrayed by the vermilion on his clothes. This amorous intrigue was suited to the taste of the court where it was uproariously popular, the

moral scruples of the courtiers being easily lulled to sleep by the introduction of the goddess. Many writers tried their hand at this aristocratic comedy but none so successfully as Bharat Chandra Ray (eighteenth century) famous for all time as the author of *Vidyasundar*. His refinement, grace, precision, economy, wit and wisdom mark him out as a great master of style and compensate for a certain obscenity in his telling of the story. This obscenity was the cause of his being somewhat looked down upon during the nineteenth century but he is gradually coming back into his own. As a stylist he is second to none and as a wit has few equals. His lines are eminently quotable. At their best they attain the summit of worldly wisdom. The character he most successfully portrayed is Hira Malini, the duenna. Unfortunately for society Hira Malini is an immortal. She is known in Bengal as few virtuous heroines are. His very success thus brought Bharat Chandra into disrepute, although he was personally of spotless character and one who suffered much for his straightforwardness. He was a man who pleased half the world with his wit and displeased the other half with his frankness. In many respects he is surprisingly modern though his taste is really deplorable. Bharat Chandra belonged to a period of national decadence and was unable to rise above the court atmosphere in which he lived. His book, therefore, appeals more to connoisseurs than to the common people and has not become household property like Kavikankan's *Chandi*.

Though their cults were at one time rivals there was perfect harmony between the great Siva and his divine consort, Durga. They have always been regarded as

the ideal husband and wife and theirs was an ideal household. Many Bengali artists have found inspiration in this domestic scene, but in our literature justice has rarely been done to its beauty. The Mother has dominated our lives to such an extent that the Father has become in our imagination a holy good-for-nothing, a hemp-intoxicated beggar frequenting cremation grounds, living on the border line of lunacy. He is affectionately called "Pagla Baba" (Mad Daddy).

Among those who have written of Siva, the name of Rameswar (eighteenth century) may be mentioned. But the Siva stories are little read. At the Charak festival in March songs about Siva are sung. They are called "Gajan" songs and belong to the category of folk literature. The Siva of these folk-songs is the very opposite of the austere Yogi who, in magnificent aloofness, sits plunged in meditation on the lofty Himalayas.

## Chapter IV

### THE BUDDHIST AND THE MUSLIM POETS

Historically the Buddhists should have precedence over the Vaishnavas and the Saktas. But from the literary point of view they are of less interest. When Buddhism flourished the Bengali language was in its infancy. Bengali works from the Buddhist period make little sense today.

Bengali literature can almost be said to have risen from the ashes of Buddhism. Its vestiges may be classed under three heads: (1) Folk-tales and songs, proverbs and sayings, (2) Poetic legends associated with the second principle of the Buddhist trinity, Dharma, which came to be worshipped in place of Buddha, and (3) Ballads and stories associated with a semi-Buddhist cult of which Minanath and Gorakshanath were the principal figures.

Folk literature and the Buddhist impress on its origin will be spoken of in a later chapter. Here I wish only to give an idea of the Dharma poems and the Nath ballads.

Ramai Pandit (eleventh or twelfth century) was the author of *Sunya Puran*, a treatise on latter-day Buddhism, popularly known as Dharma Puja. Incidentally it

gives us a picture of the society of the time and glimpses into history. Those who followed him were farther removed from the Buddhist tradition and learning. Their books had the general title "Dharma Mangal." They were written in the conventional "Mangal" manner. Like the "Chandi Mangal" and the "Manasa Mangal" they were designed to demonstrate the power of Dharma who shepherded his worshippers through difficulties and dangers to happy endings. The authors were mostly Hindus of the respectable castes, though Ramai Pandit was an untouchable or degraded Brahman. Among these "Dharma Mangal" writers, Ghanaram (seventeenth century) and Sahadev (eighteenth century) are the best known. Ghanaram's hero is Prince Lausen, an invincible warrior whom Dharma favours at every step in his glorious career. Lausen and his enemy Ichhai Ghose may possibly have been historical figures of the Buddhist period. Sahadev concerns himself with the saints Minanath and Gorakshanath among others. They were the founders of the Nath sect. The members formed a separate caste of their own and are known as the "Naths" or "Yogis." Most of them are weavers but some of them have taken to professions and trades. Minanath and Gorakshanath preached in the tenth or the eleventh century. Their religion was a blend of Buddhism with Siva worship. Probably it originated in the Punjab or the United Provinces, but in Bengal it got mixed up with local traditions and legends.

Many are the books entitled *Goraksha Vijay* which relate the saint's temptations and conquests. His was an incorruptible character but that of his guru, Minanath, was not. Another saint of the same period was

known as Hadipa, from his Hadi origin. The Hadis were and are an untouchable caste. This saint was the guru of Queen Maynamati. Believing that her son Gopichandra would die a premature death unless he lived apart from his wife for twelve long years, Queen Maynamati drove the unfortunate Prince into exile. The leave-taking of the young man from his bride and the sorrows of the newly-wedded couple, separated by the decree of the Queen, find poignant expression in the ballads named after either Maynamati or Gopichandra.

These ballads were popular even outside Bengal. In Orissa they are sung in the Oriya language. Listening to them there as a child I little dreamt that King Gopichandra had anything to do with Queen Maynamati of Bengal! The ballads were sung by wandering minstrels known as "Yogis" to the accompaniment of the "kendra," a simple curved instrument of one or two strings, played with a bow. Perhaps the Queen was no more Bengali than the saint Gorakshanath, whom legend reports to have been a Punjabi. A Bengali name and habitation may have been respectfully bestowed upon her. This reminds me that the Chand Sadagar of the previous chapter also may or may not have been a Bengalee. When I visited Champanagar in Bhagalpur a friend of mine told me that it was the Champanagar of Chand Sadagar. But there are many such names in Bengal itself, where Chand Sadagar is said to have lived. The truth seems to be that, previous to the modern period, no provincial consciousness existed. Like the heroes and heroines of our common mythology, the heroes and heroines of our ballads and folklore are often common to several parts of India.

Ballad singers wandered freely over the country taking their songs and legends with them. It is not possible always to trace the original home of the characters from these songs in their extant forms. They must be taken as our common Indian heritage.

The Bengali Muslim poets also were free from provincialism and from sectarian bias as well. Some wrote Vaishnava poetry, some Sakta and some even "Goraksha.Vijay" poems. The two greatest names are Daulat Kazi and Alawal. Both of them lived in the seventeenth century and were attached to the Buddhist court of Roshang which has since been identified with Arakan ( now in Burma ). Their patron was a minister by the name of Magan Thakur who, in spite of his Hindu appellation, was a Muslim. Thus for a time Bengali poetry was presided over by an Arakanese Buddhist king outside Bengal through his Bengali Muslim minister with a Hindu name.

Daulat Kazi died young. His masterpiece, *Sati Mayna*, was left unfinished. Mayna was the faithful wife of Prince Lor. He caused her much suffering by making love to Princess Chandrani, a married woman whose husband was a eunuch. It is my surmise that the Lor-Chandrani affair was borrowed from some Hindi or Urdu romance. Such names are unknown in Bengal. But Mayna is a good old Bengali name and the sufferings of the faithful wife have been depicted in the traditional Bengali way. Daulat Kazi had a pleasing style. He was a master of the felicitous phrase and his epigrams survive still in the speech of the people of the Chittagong District where his apt sayings are quoted as proverbs to this day.

Though Daulat was a born poet and Alawal was not, the latter is the greater of the two. His works were mostly translations or adaptations but there is in all of them the masterly touch of a wise and enlightened man. Alawal's learning was colossal. He knew Sanskrit, Persian, Hindi and other languages. He was thoroughly acquainted with astrology, Ayurveda, Hindu rites and rituals, and the Vaishnava doctrine of love. He was a man who observed much and experienced more.

*Padmavati*, his masterpiece, is a translation of Malik Muhammad Jaisi's famous Hindi poem *Padmavat*, whose heroine is Queen Padmini of Chitor, the Queen who defied King Alauddin of Delhi. Both Jaisi and Alawal belonged to the age of chivalry. One was not so much the translator of the other as his fellow-admirer of the most beautiful woman of the time, whose valour, chastity and martyrdom commanded universal homage. His translation is literal only in places, for he gives his imagination ample scope. Alawal is in the best tradition of Indian poetry. His taste, terseness, dignity and wisdom mark him out as a pillar of Bengali literature.

It is a curious fact that though he wrote in the standard Bengali his works were found in Persian script and had to be transcribed for us. This would suggest that a sort of "Bengali Urdu" was beginning to develop but it withered away for want of perseverance. There are many romances and theological works in the Bengali script which are written in a language so highly Persianized that only those Mussalmans who have been brought up in Maktabas and Madrassas can understand them. Some of these have Hindu heroes and heroines while others



have Muslim heroes who marry Hindu wives without making any attempt to convert them. Perhaps the knights and ladies of the past had no patience with the priests.

Apart from fairy tales from the *Arabian Nights* the theme that has afforded most inspiration to our Bengali Muslim poets is the immortal story of Imam Hossain's death on the field at Karbala. Muhammad Khan (seventeenth century) is said to be the best writer on this subject before the modern period. There was a time when, at the annual commemoration of the tragedy, called the Moharram, Hindus took part in the procession equally with the Mussalmans, joining in the "lathi" play and mock fighting with a deeply religious spirit. Nowadays it would lead to rioting. *O tempora ! O mores !*

## Chapter V

# THE RAMAYANA, THE MAHABHARATA AND THE CHAITANYA CHRONICLES

Like the Brahmaputra and the Ganges, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have built up and sustained this young province with the ancient wisdom of Aryavarta. Not a child but has heard them from the lips of its grandmother or has seen them acted by troupes of strolling players. Professional story-tellers or "kathaks" are dying out in these days of printing and literacy, but a time was when they kept their audiences spell-bound for hours on end, often breaking into recitation and song. There were also the "Bhats" or ballad singers who carried the epic tales to every home. Only a handful of learned men knew the language of the original, Sanskrit. Yet the millions were aware of the fate of the virtuous Sita, the war that was waged for her recovery, the fall of the mighty Ravana and the heroic exploits of Rama, Lakshman and Hanuman. And all knew the sequel when Princess Draupadi was publicly insulted in the court of the Kurus, how the shame of their lady burned deep into the hearts of the

Pandu Princes, how after exile and hiding they emerged stronger than ever, how the whole of India became divided into two irreconcilable camps and every attempt at appeasement failed, and how the gigantic battle of Kurukshetra dragged on day after day, destroying both armies. There were only half a dozen survivors on the one side and about a dozen on the other. The victors were as miserable as the vanquished and left the world in disgust.

By a system of oral transmission and visual representation the spiritual experience of the race was made part of each man's inner equipment. No better education could have been conceived of, if education means a process by which the race as a whole grows wise. Wisdom, as distinguished from knowledge, could not have been universalised in a country of the size and with the population of India by any other means. Words can hardly do justice to the lessons of these two epics. They have enabled India to outlast waves of invasion, subjection and worse, and she is as young as ever.

It was fairly late in the day that any one thought of making translations from the Sanskrit for the people were content with what was presented to their eyes and ears through their own familiar dialect. After a change of rulers, however, the Muslim nobles began to express a desire to have the poems read in their courts. As they did not care to take the trouble of learning Sanskrit they compromised with Bengali translations. Hitherto the Brahman priesthood had consistently opposed all such attempts for they enjoyed a monopoly of the Sanskrit texts even as the Christian priests monopolised

Latin and Greek in the Middle Ages. As the clergy frowned on the translations of the Bible so the Brahmans frowned upon the translating of their sacred books. They feared it would undermine their authority. They were not wrong. Shortly after the first translations were made, or about the same time, the movement inaugurated by Chaitanya convulsed Bengal much in the same way as the Lutheran movement agitated Germany. Chaitanya made no distinction between the Brahman and the Sudra, the touchable and the untouchable, the high and the low. Himself a vastly learned Brahman, he took to his heart all who devoted themselves to Krishna and were kind to living things. Those who came to abuse him and who shed his blood by throwing broken pots at him, stayed to become his disciples, held by the power of the love that moved him. There was consternation in the dovecots of orthodoxy, for gone were the privileges of birth and the sacred thread. All and sundry could now, by calling themselves Vaishnavas, gain access to the scriptures, either in the original Sanskrit or in translations. Bengali was held in contempt as a vulgar tongue by the pundits of the time. Fortunately there was no persecution, probably because the Muslim rulers were not overpartial to the Brahmans, but there was social ostracism in ample measure. To this day there is a saying:—

Krittibas, Kasidas, and the pseudo-Brahmans,  
Ruinous have been these three.

Ruinous, I suppose, to the monopolists. But this saying introduces us to Krittibas Ojha (fifteenth century), the first and foremost of the Bengali *Ramayana*

writers, and to Kasiram Das (seventeenth century) the foremost, but not the first, composer of a Bengali *Mahabharata*. I prefer not to call them translators because, though they set out to translate, they, in the course of their composition, incorporated many a tale current at the time and gave us a thinly veiled picture of the contemporary scene. Ancient heroes and heroines became in their hands Bengalees almost to a fault.

Beyond certain autobiographical references in their works, little is known about these two masters. Krittibas was patronised by a Hindu king whose identity is a matter of conjecture. Kasiram Das was a man of means and carried out his self-appointed task without influential assistance. Two centuries stood between them. Kasiram's style is naturally more modern and refined. But to Krittibas goes the credit of laying the foundations of Bengali narrative verse. He was one of the makers of our literature and his struggles with an untried medium deserve our unstinted praise.

There were many other *Ramayana* writers as well, some in Eastern and some in Western Bengal. In the days before printing, regionalism had full play even within the same linguistic area. Krittibas had to wait until some European missionaries published his *Ramayana* in the nineteenth century and thereby made it known throughout the province. Chandravati (sixteenth century), a poetess of Mymensingh District in Eastern Bengal, composed a *Ramayana* which has retained its popularity to this day. Hers was a pathetic life. It was made into a ballad, an honour unique in our literature. Her faithless fiancé returned as a penitent, but she refused to see him. He drowned himself and Chan-

dravati did not long survive him. She poured her heart into the tragic story of Sita. Many are the feminine touches which give distinction to her manner of telling a much-told story.

Among *Mahabharata* makers Sanjaya (fifteenth century) is the earliest known. The poem had been translated earlier still for Nasrat Shah, a Muslim ruler, but the work is lost. Sanjaya's composition became the working model for subsequent authors. Quite an interesting *Mahabharata* is the one named after Paragal Khan, a Muslim general. It was by Kavindra Parameswar (sixteenth century). In the same century Chhuti Khan, the son of Paragal Khan, sponsored yet another by Srikaran Nandi.

The *Bhagavata*, the story of the incarnations of Vishnu, was translated into Bengali also. The followers of Chaitanya who saw in him a divine incarnation were delighted when one of them, Brindabandas (sixteenth century) came out with a *Chaitanya Bhagavata*. It was a life of the saint written in imitation of the life of Krishna. The book has some historical value for we have in it a picture of the period in which it was written. Another life of the saint, *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, by Krishnadas Kaviraj (sixteenth century) is one of the classics of Bengali literature. The author was as great an intellectual as a devotee; his presentation of the Vaishnava view of life is enlightened and noble. The portrayal of his hero's last years is full of pathos. It is one of the few theological books which have a universal appeal.

## Chapter VI

### FOLK LITERATURE

The great variety of our folk literature stands in contrast to the limited range of literature proper. The boatman, the fisherman, the snake-charmer, the elephant-trapper, each has his characteristic songs or incantations. The gypsies and the mendicants have their rich store of melodies. The peasants have their agricultural lore, householders their worldly lore, women the lore peculiar to their sex, which is often full of poetic grace. Then there are the folk-tales common to all classes and occupations.

Folk literature is practically an unexplored field of research and the examples named merely illustrate, not exhaust, it. Our scholars are usually bookworms confining their studies to manuscripts, whereas folk-songs, folk-tales and such things are seldom, if ever, written down. One has to travel in search of them and to mix familiarly with the people who have preserved them in their memories. Such enthusiasts are rare and their collections are not easily published for want of patronage. "Who will read them if they are printed?" lamented Professor Kshiti Mohan Sen of Santiniketan in course of a conversation. "How can I ask a publisher

to throw away his money ? ” Regretfully we are forced to admit that the educated public is apathetic to these treasures of the humble.

To the ballads of Queen Maynamati and her son Gopichandra which would seem to cut across provincial frontiers I have already referred. The same can be said of the “ Vachans,” aphorisms, attributed to Dak and to Khana. Dak may have been an experienced man of the world with the gift of pointing a moral in a few forceful lines of verse or the name may have been a pseudonym for many anonymous moralists who thus left on record their practical wisdom. Here is a typical “ Daker Vachan ” :—

Whenever I get something good,  
I don't wait for the morrow to enjoy it.  
Making the most of milk and curds,  
I avert illness with medicine.  
Of what use is this world  
To me, says Dak, if I die ?

Khana's identity is untraceable. He or she had an unrivalled knowledge of agriculture. All good cultivators to this day refer to Khana constantly in their labour. Here is a specimen :—

Paddy thrives in sunlight, betel in shade,  
So said Khana as he passed.

This kind of aphorism must be at least a thousand years old. Such adages have no literary value apart from the brevity and the pithiness with which they express time-worn truths.

If these “ Vachans ” have been helpful to the grown-up, the “ chharas ” have delighted the child. These are



nursery rhymes and fables in verse, some of hoary antiquity while others are obviously recent. Authorship is not tagged on to the verse as in the "vachans." It is obvious that many are most probably of feminine origin, having been improvised to amuse or to soothe a crying baby. They make more sound than sense and the word pictures that emerge often melt into one another. Read between the lines they reveal the unhappiness and the trouble of being a young daughter-in-law, or the longing with which girls cherish memories of their childhood. The social scene is mirrored in some of the rhymes and war and famine have also left their impress upon these innocent doggerels. Chharas are impossible to translate for they rely upon rhyme, rhythm and assonance for their effects. Here, however, is an amusing one :—

Mother dear, Mother, your son-in-law has come.  
He has gone to bathe with a *kochu* leaf on his head !  
I gave him oil to massage himself ; he threw it away !  
I gave him a knife to cut sugar-cane ; he cut his nose !  
I gave him water to wash his feet and he drank it !  
I gave him a *piri* to sit upon and he has lain down upon it !

A very creditable collection of the folk-tales of Bengal has been made by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar. Most of them are fairy-tales meant for children, frequently abounding in demons and beautiful princesses. The former are slain and the latter rescued by princes after incredible adventures. The prince is usually accompanied by his friends, a minister's son, the son of the chief of police, and a wealthy merchant's son. There are stories in which the King, grieving for his lost children, at last discovers them disguised as animals or

flowers. A happy ending is coupled with the punishment of the wicked step-mother who had contrived to do away with them. Every recital is ended with :—

Now my tale is done,  
The amaranth has shut its leaves.  
Why have you shut your leaves ?  
Why do the cows eat them ?  
Why do you eat them, cows ?  
Why doesn't the cowherd take us to pasture ?  
Cowherd, why don't you take the cows to pasture ?

And so on.

Nobody knows the age of these tales which must be as old as the race itself. Some of them are, I think, current in other provinces also with minor variations. There is nothing exclusively Bengali in them as in the group of tales named after their heroines, "Puspamala," "Sankhamala," "Kanchanmala," "Madhumala," and "Malanchamala." These are relics of the Buddhist period and mention seafaring. The heroes are often merchants who travel abroad, leaving their young wives at home. Many are their trials and tribulations. Some of the heroines rise to womanly greatness through their unsullied purity. They are adventurous in their own right and often rescue their husbands or brothers. There are no restrictions imposed on them because of their sex and no trace of "purdah." It is remarkable that these were lost to the Hindus and that we owe their preservation to the Muslims, though Islamic influence is conspicuous by its absence.

Hindu women have a separate set of tales known as the "Bratakatha" which are associated with ceremonies

performed by themselves alone. The stories are read on certain fast days or days marking the taking or completion of a vow. They are of a didactic nature. Some are of Buddhist origin with Brahmanic interpolations and adaptations. As literature their chief merit lies in the manner of their recital. Many are very old.

The contribution of women to our literature is not confined to folk-tales. They tried their hands at ballads as well. Chandravati, of whose *Ramayana* I have already spoken, was also the authoress of some of the ballads still current in Mymensingh District. Though they have been somewhat tampered with, these ballads are one of the marvels of Bengali literature. The beauty, the force, the unsophisticated portrayal of emotional states and the freshness of the imagery all point to a submerged period in our history when the unhappy lives of real men and women who loved and suffered against a background of social repression were the material from which poets fashioned their ballads. No god or goddess interferes at the critical juncture to preserve the heroes and heroines from their fate. They face death and disgrace squarely by themselves.

The chief entertainment of the people was the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and the ballads had a limited circulation. The province as a whole remained ignorant of them. This has led to doubts of their authenticity. But the educated public was equally ignorant of the Baul songs, the Bhawaia melodies and the Raibese dances. Their genuineness is unquestionable though a modern hand is often visible through the old texture.

The Bauls, or "Fools of God," are an esoteric sect drawn equally from Mohammedans and Hindus. They

are mostly illiterate men and women innocent both of the *Koran* and the *Puranas*. They rely on their own conscience and innate spiritual insight to direct their course through the maze of this world. To them God and man are the eternal lovers who abide in the human body. What is the need to go to Benares or Mecca on pilgrimage when in your own self is the temple or Kaaba of the Lord? In one of his plays Rabindranath Tagore portrays a blind Baul whose inner illumination makes of him a guide to the mysteries of life and death and everlasting youth. He himself acted the rôle.

Baul poetry is full of gems. Here is one :—

Who is this goldsmith that has come to the lotus pool ?  
He tests the lotus with his touchstone ! O dear, O dear !

The suggestiveness and the simplicity of these two lines are characteristic of the Bauls.

The Bhawaias are not a sect, but a class of professional singers, so I hear. They entertain the country-folk with their light-hearted, humorous ditties, somewhat coarse and ribald, but lively, vigorous and true to life. These are in Eastern Bengal dialects. Musical tournaments easily arise out of such professional singing and they were once the rage in the villages, and later in the towns. The Kabiwalas or “Meistersingers” of Bengal used to fight wordy duels of which the arsenals were the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Bhagavata*. Later the tournaments degenerated; the Kabiwalas grew vulgar and verbose, their persistently bad taste excluding them from good society. Some of their earlier improvisations can claim poetic merit of no mean order. It is astonishing to discover a Portuguese among them.



# NEW BENGALI LITERATURE



## Chapter VII

### THE TRANSITION

Bharat Chandra Ray wrote his *Vidyasundar*, the last landmark of the old Bengali literature, a few years before the battle of Plassey ( 1757 ) and Michael Madhusudan Dutt wrote his *Meghnad Badh*, the first landmark of the new literature, a few years after the Sepoy Mutiny ( 1857 ). The hundred years between these two events were a period of transition. The English merchants of Calcutta took over the administration of the province and subjugated the whole of Hindustan. A change of rulers was no new thing in India's history but this time the political change was accompanied by social, economic and cultural changes of immense significance. Towns assumed an importance they had never possessed in the past. All the wealth and intelligence of Bengal were attracted to Calcutta. Railways, steamers and post-offices carried the written word into the remotest interior and the printing-press multiplied it a thousand-fold. The wealthier youth were brought up in the new schools and colleges and their heads filled with ideas derived from English literature.

On Bengali the first effect of these changes was the emergence of prose. Strange as it may seem, a prose



worthy of the name had not existed before. The European missionaries, by translating the Bible and writing Christian tracts, did some pioneer work in this line. Their protégé, Ram Bose, wrote the first important book of prose, the *Pratapaditya Charit* or "Life of Pratapaditya," a Bengali prince who fought for independence from the Mughals. This was published in 1801. Once the ice was broken writers took to prose as ducks take to water. In the hands of Raja Ram Mohan Ray, a quarter of a century later, it became a powerful instrument of social and religious reform. The next considerable writer was Akshay Kumar Datta whose scientific and philosophical articles were masterly. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar added a literary flavour to their prose style and prepared the way for Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.

The enrichment of poetry was another consequence. Iswar Chandra Gupta ruled poetic circles with his sword of satire. Western influence was slow to make itself felt but it was not long before there was a silent revolution in poetic taste. Readers were less ready to applaud play upon words or brilliant repartee; they felt the need of something grand and noble and virile—something Homeric or Miltonic. Michael Madhusudan Dutt came because the scene was already set for him.

A third effect was the rise of Bengali drama. Dramatic performances had not been unknown. "Jatras," open-air performances by strolling players of plays on Puranic themes, were a happy combination of entertainment and education. With the growth of cities a need arose for fixed stages, special buildings for use as theatres and players capable of satisfying audiences

whose relative sophistication made them discontented with what pleased villagers. Both Sanskrit and English plays were produced in Bengali versions. Social reform was in the air and Ram Narayan wrote a play entitled *Kulinakula Sarvaswa* condemning polygamy. It was such a success that polygamy received a mortal blow and the Bengali theatre began to thrive. Michael Madhusudan Dutt lent a helping hand and Dinabandhu Mitra soon made his début with his famous *Nil Darpan*. The technique of these dramas was predominantly English though their framework was Sanskritic. The Jatra tradition lingered as an undercurrent. The Calcutta stage in its turn influenced the country-side Jātras. Nowadays the Jātras are imitating the theatre in methods of production and the Calcutta stage, in spite of modern technical advance, remains Jatra-like at the core.

Prose, poetry and drama, all reflected the impact of a strange civilisation which had little in common with our own. Its scientific and humanistic aspects made a strong appeal to our wise men who accepted them as gifts of Providence. But they firmly opposed conversion to Christianity or Anglicisation of their way of life or of their culture. The Brahmo Samaj movement of Raja Ram Mohan Ray maintained this balanced attitude. The ordinary reaction, however, was either complete Anglicisation or an intensified conservatism. Many intellectuals became Christians and a good many otherwise sensible men put themselves at the head of the die-hards, resisting every manner of change: from the abolition of suttee to the introduction of English education and surgery with its attendant dissection.

The literary field was thronged with would-be well-wishers of society. The printing-press had the fascination of a novelty and so had prose. All and sundry sought to get their views into print. Magazines and newspapers sprang up like mushrooms. Here are two typical extracts from Long's *Descriptive Catalogue of Bengali Works* :—

*The Durjan Daman Navmi*, by Thakurdas Basu : tri-monthly, opposed Young Bengal, defended idolatry, had as its symbol the picture of a cross fastened by a chain, to signify it would restrain Christian influence.

*The Sarbashubhakari*, 4 as. monthly, pp. 10. Essays on the suppressing of early marriages, female instruction, man's equality : spirit drinking : ghat murders : the charak. The organ of one of these societies which have been formed in such numbers by natives in Calcutta : brilliant as a meteor and as short-lived.

The two best magazines were the *Tatwabodhini Patrika* edited by Akshay Kumar Datta and the *Vividhartha Sangraha* edited by Rajendralal Mitra, both of them balanced in judgment and encyclopædic in scope. They established standards which are still considered high.

Among the many newspapers which also appeared, the most literary one was the *Prabhakar*, edited by Iswar Chandra Gupta. It was at first a weekly, then a daily, and was read more for its verses than for its news.

The zeal of the neo-Bengali writers also found expression in an amazing variety of translations from English and Sanskrit, text-books, encyclopædias, treatises on medicine, mechanics, chemistry, phonetics and all manner of subjects. Suddenly roused from the compla-

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cent isolation of centuries, the people struggled to come abreast of the times and simultaneously began to clean away the rubbish of outworn habits from their own ancient culture, to make it fresh and beautiful and familiar. It was recuperative rather than creative work; creation was left to the period that followed. The spade-work done lightened the labours of the great writers who were to come.

## Chapter VIII

### MICHAEL AND BANKIM

The old traditions of our literature were turned topsy-turvy with the advent of the Brave New World inaugurated by the writers educated in the newly-founded English schools. The herald of this new age was Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873). The scion of an aristocratic Hindu family, he ran away as a boy and became a Christian. He studied in the Bishop's College and went to Madras where he distinguished himself as an Indo-English poet. His first marriage, to an Englishwoman, was a failure. But his second, also to an Englishwoman, proved a true heart union.

After his second marriage he returned to Bengal from South India and allowed himself to be persuaded to try his hand at writing in Bengali. At first he felt the hesitation of the foreigner but his was a loving touch and exotic melodies, hitherto undreamt of in the language, rewarded him. A grand and majestic music sounded in a land too long accustomed to a rustic simplicity. It was a revelation of unsuspected power disclosing great possibilities. His was a free and fiery spirit. Though he kept his sorrows to himself and it is difficult to follow his emotional progress, his mind is laid

bare in his resounding verse. To read him is to breathe a freer air. His life was of the kind from which plays are made and stories written and it is no wonder that some of our modern playwrights have chosen it as a theme for dramas.

Michael's ambition was to write an epic. His first attempt was *Tilottama Sambhava*, based on the mythological story of the perfectly beautiful woman, created to be an apple of discord. This book made his reputation but there was an uproar over its blank verse, an unheard-of innovation in our literature. Michael hushed all controversy by his second epic, *Meghnad Badh*, which was hailed as a work of enduring greatness. Its theme was taken from the *Ramayana*. Meghnad, the heroic son of Ravana, fell in battle and his no less heroic wife, Pramila, destroyed herself on his funeral pyre.

In *Virangana Kavya* Michael composed a series of imaginary epistles in blank verse, each of them addressed by a mythological lady to her lord or lover. They are in the best tradition of chivalry.

Michael's whole conception of life was heroic. Heroism was for him the supreme virtue in both men and women. This rigorous creed left little scope for humour or wit. But his plays were an exception to this rule. His best-known play is, however, a tragedy woven around the Rajput princess, Krishna Kumari.

As he advanced in age he outgrew his grandiloquence, softened, and turned to the writing of lyrics. The *Brajangana* poems were on the time-worn theme of Radha and Krishna. They are sonorous and sweet in the true Vaishnava manner. It is said that a pious Vaishnava who read them was led to believe that the

author was, like himself, a devotee. Imagine his astonishment when he called and was received by a gentleman European in all except colour!

This contrast between his way of thinking and his living habits made him a tragic figure. His admirers were not infrequently alienated by his Anglicisation and his extravagance. But in his creations, both poetic and dramatic, he was loyal to the ancient and lofty ideals of his country. He was no reformer or revolutionary with a message or a mission. He wanted only to live and to love as the heroes had done. For this the Hindu society of his day gave no opportunity. Neither Christianity nor Europe held greater charm for him than Hindustan as she had been in her epic past.

Nostalgia and homesickness for his country characterize the sonnets he wrote while sojourning in Europe. He remembers in them the great poets of India, the immortal characters of Sanskrit and Bengali literature and many other things associated with his distant country. These sonnets after Petrarch were another innovation which he introduced, as he had introduced blank verse. He pays tribute through them to Italy, Versailles, Dante, Victor Hugo, Tennyson and many others.

Michael returned from Europe a barrister-at-law with high hopes of making his mark in the legal profession. He was soon disillusioned. The bar had no use for his majestic phrases and grand manner nor was his the cool, calculating way of a worldly-wise counsel. He had mistaken his vocation and died a pauper's death. Friends, relatives and countless admirers could not attend his funeral as they were excluded from the

Christian ceremony. Withheld from paying their last tribute to their beloved poet his countrymen mourned him all the more. Later, permission to visit his grave was given to all alike and it became a place of pilgrimage.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1893), a member of the Provincial Civil Service, led the humdrum life of the average Indian official, enlivened by studies and social contacts. But he was endowed with a powerful imagination and a delightful sense of humour. Like Michael, he began to write first in English, but quickly discovered his true medium. Inheriting an inconsiderable prose tradition he left one of majestic proportions. Novel followed novel, each as successful as its predecessor. Meanwhile he had begun to edit a literary periodical named *Banga Darshan* through which he formed and guided the critical taste of his times. His essays were witty and his style, at its best, was a model of compression and clarity.

For the subjects of his novels Bankim chose historical themes mostly. Through reconstructing our national past he strove to revive national pride and self-respect. The shame of India's subjection had burned deeply into his mind. As he grew older he preached national regeneration through religious revival. The religion he advocated was essentially a blend of the *Gita* with Western positivism. His later novels became his pulpit. That was the heyday of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the Brahmo Samaj and Bankim's religion was not taken seriously. But his ardent nationalism set the hearts of his countrymen on fire. The agitation over the partition of Bengal which was known as the "Swadeshi



Movement " was the flaring up of the flame he and his contemporaries had kindled. His "Bande Mataram" (Hail! Motherland!) has become the national song of all India. In it we have the distilled essence of his patriotism.

But Bankim Chandra was no less great as an artist than as a nationalist. His characters were more real than living men and women. Even those drawn from history were re-created by his imagination. Of his countless heroes and heroines, saints and sinners, buffoons and villains, my own favourites are Shaibalini and Pratap in *Chandrashekhar*.

The historical novels cover almost the entire Mohammedan period. *Mrinalini* gives a vivid picture of Bengal betrayed by her Quislings to the early Muslim invaders. *Durgeshmandini* and *Kapalakundala* have for their setting Bengal in Akbar's time. *Rajsingh* takes us to Rajput chivalry in the days of Aurangzeb and *Sitaram* brings us back to Bengal under the Nawabs of Murshidabad when Hindu chieftains were becoming rebellious. In *Chandrashekhhar*, *Devichaudhurani* and *Ananadamath*, all placed in the unsettled period when the Mohammedan régime was giving place to the British, Bankim introduces some white servants of the East India Company. His anti-Muslim bias gradually merges into a feeling of resentment against the English. But he admired their bravery even as he had acknowledged many fine Mughal qualities.

His social novels deal with contemporary Bengal society. In both *Bishbriksha* (The Poison Tree) and *Kishnakanter Will* (Krishnakanta's Will), lovely widows work havoc in the lives of adoring husbands and

devoted wives. Such was Bankim's answer to one of the burning questions of the day, widow-marriage. *Rajani*, *Radharani* and *Indira* have happy endings. The last-named story was his own favourite and is probably the best he wrote. Indira, an innocent bride carried off by dacoits, contrives to become her husband's mistress without his recognising her. He is satisfied at last of her identity and reassured as to her chastity. The couple return home as man and wife. The plot is too good to be true but reveals the heart-soreness of the author over the fate of abducted girls who, for no fault of their own, are automatically discarded by their families.

Though he had an innate social conservatism and did not agree with reformers like Raja Ram Mohan. Ray and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra was a radical thinker. In his essays in particular he gives us a foretaste of such problems as national independence and even socialism. His was unquestionably the finest mind of his generation.

## Chapter IX

### THE CONTEMPORARIES OF MICHAEL AND BANKIM

Like his friend, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Dinabandhu Mitra served his literary apprenticeship under the poet Iswar Chandra Gupta, editor of the *Prabhakar*. A born humorist, he was thus trained to be witty. The result was a number of roaring comedies but the play by which he is best known has a tragic ending. *Nil Darpan* mirrored with cruel truth the oppressiveness of the indigo planters. For translating it into English Michael Madhusudan Dutt is said to have lost his job and for publishing the English version a benevolent missionary, Long, was imprisoned. Fortunately the book was written under a pseudonym; otherwise the author, who was a postal official, might not have escaped punishment.

*Nil Darpan* made a noise in the world. It was translated into several European languages. No other Bengali work had such luck. The wrongs to which it drew attention were redressed in Bengal but lingered on in Bihar until Mahatma Gandhi offered Satyagraha on the issue. Authoritative text-books on Indian history mention the good work accomplished by this drama.

It was as good from the artistic point of view as it was as propaganda. The peasants, the planters and the planters' agents had been taken from life. Their speech, their manner, their ways of thinking, had been noted and recorded with faithful exactness. Brought up in poverty the author had an instinctive affinity with the poor. His name, Dinabandhu, means "Friend of the Poor," and was of his own taking. Gandharva Narayan was his original name. Sympathy and understanding, leavened with wit and humour, made him a universal favourite wherever he went. His postal work brought him into contact with all sorts of people, high and low. His weakness was that without the spur of a social evil he could not turn his wealth of knowledge and experience to artistic account. Nearly all his plays hinge on some evil practice of the day. Those which had their origin in a keen sense of wrong were realistic and grand, while the remainder sank to the level of popular patter or sentimental tragedy. His dramas are the best we have in Bengal but they have already dated.

Dinabandhu was neither an actor nor a stage-manager and thus lacked an intimate contact with the theatre. Girish Chandra Ghose was both. He was so successful in these two capacities that his admirers dubbed him the Garrick of Bengal. Having a professional group of actors and actresses dependent upon him for their nightly employment he had to fall back on his own talent as a playwright for material. He wrote and produced a vast number of plays, some original and others taken from various sources. Hindu mythology and Indian history were freely drawn upon. Girish

even laid hands on Shakespeare.

His works ran into numerous volumes and, whatever their literary merit, they had their importance in the development of the professional theatre which, in spite of its drawbacks, has become a permanent feature of city life. After Girish the authors who most enriched it were Amritalal Bose and Kshirode Prasad Vidya-vinode.

In poetry the epic had become a craze. Many Bengali poets harbour a secret preference for it to this day. *Meghnad Badh* was followed by all manner of *badhs*, which meant slaughter. The best was *Vritra Samhar* (The Slaying of Vritra), written by Hem Chandra Banerjee. The fruit of his maturity was this epic poem. Vritra, an invincible demon, could only be slain with a weapon fashioned from the bones of the sage Dadhichi. Dadhichi willingly gave his life that the world might be rescued from the ravages of the demon. Hem Chandra took the opportunity afforded by this Puranic subject to suggest to his people the necessity of self-sacrifice in a noble cause. In this poet's lesser works also humanitarian sentiments and patriotism predominate. Here are some lines which seem prophetic at the present time. They were written seventy years ago :—

There is America, newly risen,  
Hopeful of swallowing the world !  
Even barbarous Japan is free !  
India alone sleeps on.

This patriotic enthusiasm further crystallized in the epic poems of Nabin Chandra Sen, a member of the Provincial Civil Service, whose *Palasir Juddha* (The

Battle of Plassey) lamented the sunset of free Bengal as her last independent ruler was betrayed by his army chiefs with the exception of the heroic figure of Mohanlal. In his other epics Nabin Chandra reverted to mythological subjects. Like Bankim, he pinned his hope of a national regeneration on a religious revival.

Rangalal Banerjee, another eminent poet, derived his inspiration from the annals of Rajput chivalry. "Who wants to live without freedom? Who wants to live?" was his impassioned cry. Young men in Bengal were wearying of Anglicised ways as they realised more and more that they had no freedom though in their own country. "In thy native land thou art an exile!" exclaimed another poet, Govinda Chandra Ray. "After how long, O India, this ocean of misery wilt thou cross?"

The shame of subjection produced a reaction against Western civilisation in the very circles which had first been enamoured of it. Toru Dutt, an Indo-English poetess of Bengal, idealised the Indian past in her *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. If she loved France above all other countries it was because France was then the land of liberty. This young Bengalee girl died when she was barely twenty-one and has ever since been regretted. Had she lived she might have been one of the great figures of Bengali literature like her fellow-Christian, Michael Madhusudan Dutt.

Patriotism was henceforth the criterion by which a poet's reputation rose or fell. Biharilal Chakravarti, who was rapt in his own dream of beauty and walked as if but dimly comprehending his surroundings through the haze of his imagination, did not make any

mark on the poetry of the time. It was this sensitive worshipper of the Muse, however, whom the young Rabindranath accepted as his guide, rejecting all others, even Michael.

Bengali prose had other great names though none so great as Bankim. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, the lion-hearted social reformer, also exerted a powerful influence on Bengali prose style. His diction was highly Sanskritic, after the manner of Mrityunjay Tarkalankar and other pioneers, but the clarity of his mind shone through the forest of his phrases. Bhudev Mukerjee whose prose style was simpler may be set down as belonging to the Vidyasagar school, though the two men adhered firmly to their respective ways of thinking. Vidyasagar was an agnostic and a champion of radical change whereas Bhudev had an unmovable faith in the ideals and customs which had stood the test of time though he was not against all change.

Romesh Chunder Dutt, a distinguished member of the Indian Civil Service who was destined to become a president of the Indian National Congress, was akin to Bankim in his prose style and to Vidyasagar in his social thought. His historical tales are still popular though his social novels have dated. Taraknath Ganguli was the author of a memorable story called *Swarnalata*. Sanjib Chandra Chatterjee, a brother of Bankim, was also a gifted writer of fiction whose name is remembered and Trailokyanath Mukherjee has left an evergreen children's tale named *Kankavati*.

Prose was further simplified by the great Brahamo evangelist, Keshub Chunder Sen, whose *Sulabh Samachar*

was a newspaper intended for the masses. The times were not ripe for such an enterprise. In the early part of the present century another attempt was made by an ardent patriot, Brahma Bandhab Upadhyay whose newspaper, *Sandhya*, was written in a language that appealed to the common people. A third trial remains to be made. While Keshub Chunder's efforts toward a simpler prose were largely overlooked, Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hutom Puchar Naksa* ( The Sketches of Hutom the Owl ) also remained neglected. It was written in a natural, easy style without sacrificing literary standards. Its humour recalls that of *Alaler Gharer Dulal* by Tekchand, one of the masterpieces of the transition period and milestones of Bengali prose.

Mention must be made of Mir Musharraf Hussain whose *Bishad Sindhu* ( Ocean of Sorrow ) remains the best Bengali prose work on the ever popular theme of the Karbala tragedy. His writing is powerfully dramatic.



## Chapter X

### RABINDRANATH TAGORE

The Tagores were already an illustrious family before the birth of Rabindranath. Ostracised as Pirali Brahmans ( Pirali being derived from Pir ) by the orthodox because they had at one time been on friendly terms with Mohammedans, they associated with the English also when the latter came to trade and founded the port of Calcutta. Cosmopolitanism was in the family tradition, curiosity a family trait. One of the first Bengalees to sail abroad was Dwarkanath Tagore, unofficially styled a Prince. Unfortunately he died in England.

Devendranath Tagore, Dwarkanath's son and Rabindranath's father, united in his spiritual heritage a leaning towards Sufism with a pronounced preference for the *Upanishads*. He had Christian contacts too. The mantle of Raja Ram Mohan Ray fell upon his shoulders. For a generation he led the Brahmo Samaj and later one of the three sections into which it split. He enjoyed the respect of all sects and was generally revered as the *Maharshi* or the great sage.

In his cultural heritage Oriental and European currents mingled and throughout his long life he strove

to unite the best elements in both traditions. To poets, painters, sculptors, musicians, thinkers and preachers of all denominations and of all countries his house was always open. Travellers from Japan, Muslim peasants from North Bengal, political leaders from Bombay and innumerable others were to be seen there at one time or another. Two Bengali monthlies, one for adults and the other for adolescents, emerged from this amazing household in addition to the periodical published by the Brahmo Samaj which was under the Maharshi's control. Younger members of the family, both boys and girls, were encouraged in amateur theatricals of their own and the leaders of Calcutta society were invited to their performances. A daughter-in-law set a standard of dress for women which still prevails in Bengal and most of India. Another lady of the family wrote books on cookery.

Even without Rabindranath this extraordinary family would have left its mark on literature, painting and religion. The Maharshi himself was the author of a famous autobiography. His eldest son, Dwijendranath, showed considerable promise as a poet in his *Swapna Prayan* (The Passing of a Dream). His essays were good-humoured in their philosophy as well as learned. Another son, Jyotirindranath, was a translator of Sanskrit dramas and French short stories. His original plays held the interest of the day. A daughter, Swarna Kumari, was the author of numerous novels, plays and poems and the editor of *Bharati*. Among other relatives Sudhindranath was distinguished for his short stories and Balendranath for the inimitable style of his essays. The great painter Abanindranath is a writer of stories

for children which are packed with imagination and fantasy.

Into this cosmopolitan and versatile family Rabindranath was born in 1861, a few years after the Mutiny. The newly awakened spirit of nationalism was already influencing his environment both within and without the big house. But vital as national self-respect was to the regeneration of the nation, national isolation was undesirable. The Tagores of Calcutta with their broader outlook realised this as few then or since. To the last day of his long life in 1941 the Poet held steadfastly to this point of view in spite of the taunts his countrymen saw fit to hurl at him whenever nationalism got the upper hand. A passionate lover of India and her finest ideals, he was too much of a Tagore to allow himself to be monopolised by any exclusive creed. He fought them with unabated enthusiasm to the end. Himself a devout Brahmo he condemned the exclusionists in his great novel *Gora*. As a leader of the Swadeshi movement he denounced his followers for their chauvinism, accounting for this defection in another important novel *Ghare Baire* (Home and the World). It is said that an Indian exile once tried to assassinate him in the United States for this supposed betrayal of nationalism.

Rabindranath had a fuller life than most of his unhappy countrymen, not only because he was born in a highly endowed family but also because he had an intuitive perception of the Supreme Reality from his earliest years. Throughout his life he strove to express it in words, the form of expression changing with each new production. Variety was the life of his art and

the art of his life. But underlying the multitudinous forms of his creation there was an astonishing changelessness in message. Whenever he withdrew to the still places of his heart where he contemplated the Ultimate, he returned with the same assurance of undying youth for himself, for mankind and for all living things. This certitude never failed him even in his last days, when his cup was full of physical and spiritual suffering. With his habitual composure and wonted wit he cheered his attendants to the end. "In my Ashram there should be no sorrow," he said to one of them. "It must be banished with songs and dances and plays." \*

At the age of three or four Rabindranath had begun his verse-making. Before his thirteenth or fourteenth year his poems were available in print and he was well-known in Calcutta literary circles by the time he was an adult. Bankim Chandra, the setting moon, garlanded the rising sun, Rabindranath, on an occasion that was destined to be prophetic. After Bankim's death the reading public turned to Rabindranath for essays and stories as well as for the lyrics which were already unrivalled. *Sadhana*, a periodical he edited in the nineties, was often filled from cover to cover with his writings alone. They ranged from poems, plays and stories to reviews and notes. Social and political reforms came within his scope and when his children reached the school-going age he founded his residential school at Santiniketan which provided the fledglings of their own and the following generations with both a nest and a sky. While free to develop their innate talents they had before them a model of discipline in

the person of their Gurudeva.

In the first decade of the present century the partition of Bengal infuriated the whole province and roused the people to a keener realisation of their helplessness under foreign rule. Rabindranath turned his indignation into creative channels and made plans for national education and social reconstruction in addition to inspiring the people with poems that stirred them to the heart and with essays that awakened self-reliance and a sense of self-respect. As the movement degenerated into bomb-throwing and secret murders the poet returned to Santiniketan and proceeded quietly with his educational experiments.

Both his "Swadeshi" period and the period of "Sadhana" preceding it were most fruitful for literature. During the latter he was absorbed in beauty and spent much of his time in a house-boat leisurely cruising on the Padma (Ganges) River while he looked after his ancestral estates. The lyrics and the lyrical dramas that were written then were the heart-beats of a soul enchanted with the wonder and the loveliness of the earth. Very few have been adequately translated into English. *Chitrangada*, *Chitra* and *Kshanika* belong to this period. The stories collected in *Galpa Guchha* have remained unsurpassed for nearly half a century.

During his "Swadeshi" period, among his multifarious activities he produced the best of his novels, *Gora*, which is also the greatest novel of our literature. The hero, a most orthodox Hindu, learns at length that he has and can have no place in Hindu society for his parents were Irish. He was a foundling of the Mutiny. The discovery drives him to despair but the heroine, Sucharita,

gives him solace and strength with her hand and his foster-mother, Anandamayi, is as sweet and gentle with him as the spirit of eternal India who accepts those who love her as her own.

The third great period in Rabindranath's life set in with his retirement from active politics. During it he was awarded the Nobel Prize for his *Gitanjali*. Other outstanding works were *Balaka* (The Swan), *Falguni* (Cycle of Spring), and *Ghare Baire* (Home and the World). It was a period of mysticism crowned with world fame. His responsibilities multiplied a hundredfold and he went out on lecture tours all over the world, bearing the message of India and her people.

The succeeding period was likewise full of creative work but preoccupation with the problems of humanity at large left him little time for any large-scale or profound literary undertaking. He developed his gifts for music, painting and the dance and branched out into rural reconstruction and popular science. But he was prolific to the end of his days and every year saw five or six volumes of prose and of verse from his untiring pen. Of the poems written during the last twenty years the collection called *Purabi* shows him at the height of his poetic and imaginative vigour even though on the wrong side of sixty.

It is not possible to do justice to the greatest poet of modern India in a short chapter. Volumes have been written about him and about his art, and his works have been translated into all civilised languages. By the Midas touch of his genius, Rabindranath turned to gold all that he, with his fabulous productivity, did in his long life of eighty years. Poems, plays, stories long and

short, novels, essays, reviews, nursery rhymes, ballads, songs and paintings flowed from him until the world marvelled at his exhaustlessness. Two generations grew up in his all-enveloping shade. Not a writer escaped his influence, not a layman but quoted him as a matter of course. He has become part of the cultural constitution of his countrymen. With them in their days of trial and sorrow, he had been with them in their joy too. Most misunderstood by his country, he was nevertheless its voice and its conscience. After the Amritsar massacre it was Tagore who broke the country's mournful silence by his outspoken letter to the Viceroy, renouncing his knighthood. '

Rabindranath is already a legendary figure and will become more legendary as time passes. Eternal youth was in his voice and the signet of eternal wisdom on his thoughts.

## Chapter XI

### CONTEMPORARIES OF RABINDRANATH

When old mental bonds are loosened and new bonds have not yet been imposed, a great flowering takes place in the intellectual life of a people. Germany had such a period when Goethe lived and the era of Rabindranath was one for Bengal. During his lifetime the mind of his fellow-Bengalees changed beyond recognition. A knowledge of European culture was rapidly spreading and the new ideas derived from it augmented the ferment. One of Rabindranath's major achievements was the resolving of the resulting conflict and the bridging of the gulf between the Orient and the Occident. Not all of his contemporaries, however, shared his universality of outlook. The majority derived their chief inspiration from the rising spirit of nationalism which climaxed in the Swadeshi movement, the greatest and most far-reaching event of the time. The Bengalees, fighting single-handed, obtained the abrogation of the partition of their province. Conscious of a new strength and unity they forged ahead in many fields. In art they made innumerable experiments and the wealth of literature that they created was so great, its writers were so numerous, that it is not possible, in the brief



compass of this essay, to do much more than tabulate the better-known among them. Rabindranath's contemporaries were not so long-lived as he. Most of them died before him and younger men took their places. For the sake of convenience I have grouped them under three heads, although a certain amount of overlapping is inevitable.

### I.—POETS

Dwijendralal Ray, who studied in England, was the most outstanding among the poets and dramatists. In him the patriotic motive became more urgent and pure. Like Bankim he ransacked Indian history for the subjects of his plays, going as far back as Chandragupta Maurya and the legendary conquerors of Ceylon. But while Bankim desired a Hindu revival, Dwijendralal strove for Hindu-Muslim unity. His Mughals are portrayed with as much sympathy and insight as their foes, the Rajputs. Of his dramas, *Chandragupta* and *Shah Jehan* are probably the most successful on the stage and are revived from time to time.

Strength and heroism were for him the supreme virtues. In his many humorous songs and poems he ridiculed all manner of weakness. The degradation brought about by foreign rule hurt him so deeply that he mocked with bitter irony the helplessness and the hypocrisy resulting from it. He is remembered chiefly for his mastery of the poetic form and sardonic humour. Devendranath Sen was a master of the sonnet. Living amidst rose gardens, he was a lover of all beautiful things which he packed into the fourteen lines of his chosen form with consummate art.

Akshay Kumar Baral excelled in love lyrics which were rich in imagery, exuberant in diction but restrained in form. He was highly individual in his poetic taste.

Kamini Ray was not the first woman to write poetry but she was the first of her sex to rank as a poet in her own right. Her best works were perhaps the poems written on the premature death of her son Asoka. In them her great sorrow is poignantly and delicately expressed, along with her joy in motherhood.

Priyambada Devi was a serene and nature-wise poet whose sweet and simple lines were full of womanly charm and grace. She wrote rarely and left only a few precious collections of her verse.

Satyendranath Datta made innumerable experiments in metre and his stanza forms sometimes surpassed even Rabindranath's. He sang of liberty and equality, tempering his patriotism with love for all mankind. He was a tireless translator of the best poetry from many of the world's literatures. Some of these translations read like originals, so deeply could he enter into the spirit of the authors.

Mohitlal Majumdar has maintained a high standard of poetic achievement by severely restricting his output and by imposing a stoic discipline on his emotions. He seems preoccupied with life in its more sombre and terrible aspects but he is fully conscious of the joy of living.

Jatindramohan Bagchi, Karunanidhan Banerjee, Kumud Ranjan Mullick and Kalidas Ray have made memorable contributions to our poetry with their patriotic and reflective lyrics. Their elegance and finish contrast sharply with the rugged lines of Jatindra-

nath Sengupta whose irony is relieved by good humour.

Mozammel Huq showed considerable command of the Bengali tongue as distinguished from the mixture of Urdu and Bengali which poets of his community were accustomed to use.

Govinda Chandra Das, a poet of Eastern Bengal, was noted for his freshness and vigour and got himself into trouble by his frankness. Rajani Kanta Sen was equally proficient in devotional, patriotic and humorous poetry and songs. Atul Prasad Sen, famous for his beautiful songs, was a good poet who found solace for his sorrows in music.

Sukumar Ray was our nearest equivalent to Lewis Carroll. His nonsense rhymes, ostensibly written for children, often reveal hidden depths of meaning. Kirandhan Chatterjee was skilled in light verse.

## II.—ESSAYISTS

The learning of Pramatha Choudhury, a barrister-at-law, is both wide and deep but he prefers to hide his light under a bushel, passing himself off as a jester in the manner of Birbal, the court jester of Akbar. "Birbal," for that is his pen-name, is undoubtedly the wittiest of contemporary writers and his essays are masterpieces of style, erudition and entertainment. His short stories share these qualities and in addition often leave one with a riddle. *Char Yari Katha* is a set of four stories which is a model of good writing. Four friends relate their love experiences to each other as they sit in their club, drinking. So polished and perfect is it that not a word can be taken

away, added or substituted by another without spoiling the effect.

He will also be remembered always for his championship of colloquial Bengali as a medium as opposed to the formal "Sadhu bhasa" of the literati which, though it had served its purpose in the early nineteenth century, had subsequently grown stilted and artificial. The *Sabuj Patra* (Green Leaf), a magazine edited by Pramatha Choudhury during the last Great War, attracted some of the most gifted members of the younger intelligentsia by its cult of youth. Among its contributors his wife Indira Devi Choudhurani occupied an eminent place.

Sivanath Sastri, distinguished for his autobiography, was also a biographer, novelist and poet with a pleasing manner and a light touch.

Ramendra Sundar Trivedi's essays on philosophical subjects had a noble wisdom and a literary atmosphere which put his readers at their ease with that great intellectual.

Suresh Chandra Samajpati's editorials in the *Sahitya* were dictatorial but none-the-less popular among the élite.

Ramananda Chatterjee, for forty years the editor of *Prabasi*, has worked incessantly to keep up literary standards. His style is precise, measured and witty.

Hirendranath Dutta's essays on literary and philosophical subjects bear the impress of his profound learning and lively intellectual curiosity.

Jogesh Chandra Ray, famous for his original researches in linguistics, writes on a great many other

subjects as well. His sentences are concise, crisp and pointed.

Bijay Chandra Majumdar, perhaps a better poet than prose writer, has a mind richly stored in comparative languages and ethnology and a wealth of expression.

Dinesh Chandra Sen, author of a monumental history of Bengali literature, was also a popularizer of mythology and folklore with a power to move the heart.

Jaladhar Sen had the same power in a greater degree. His travels are the best of his works, though he was a popular novelist too.

Benoy Kumar Sarkar is encyclopædic in the scope of his writings which hold the interest by their vivacity and gusto.

Ajit Kumar Chakravarti died young. An authority on Rabindranath, he was also a discerning critic intimately acquainted with the mystic traditions of the East and the West.

Nalini Kanta Gupta, the right-hand man of Sri Aurobindo Ghose, has universality of outlook and breadth of range grounded on classical and modern studies in many languages. He has a calm, reposeful manner of writing.

Suresh Chandra Chakravarti has the unique gift of breathing poetry into prose. A considerable poet, his essays and fairy tales are evergreen.

Atul Chandra Gupta is a discriminating critic whose appraisal is generally sound. His erudition is matched by his power of exact expression.

Dhurjati Prasad Mukherjee is a vastly learned critic, brilliant at times and erratic at others.

Barindra Kumar Ghose and Upendranath Banerjee,

ex-revolutionaries, have written their memoirs in excellent prose and portray the mind of a generation. Among other ex-revolutionaries who have literary powers, mention should be made of Motilal Ray, better known as a man of religion.

### III.—NOVELISTS

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee was renowned outside Bengal, through translations of his novels. His style was no less remarkable than his adventurous and unconventional life. The son of impoverished gentlefolk he had an early initiation into the vicissitudes of existence. At the age of seventeen or eighteen he ran away from home. Mixing freely with all classes of men and women he acquired a fund of experience that proved invaluable in his literary work later on. But he was in no hurry to write. While working as a poorly paid clerk in Burma he was pressed by a friend for a story. He sent one and it was an instantaneous success. With rare courage he threw up his job and returned to Bengal where he had no source of income. Story after story flowed from his pen and his pecuniary reward was unprecedented. His work is full of a passionate sympathy for the oppressed and the weak. Much of it has a social character and he excels in the portrayal of the overlapping and conflicting strata of village society. His women are particularly well-drawn. Some of his most vivid characters belong to the sub-social world and even the respectable ones for the most part reflect their author's Bohemian temperament. The familiar faces among them are invested with a fresh meaning and

loveliness. Among the latter are his "Bindu," "Biraj," "Rama" and other village girls, sweet and proud and misunderstood. His village scenes are unrivalled for their charm and intimacy.

The universal favourite among his novels is *Srikanta*, named after the hero whose life it in part relates. *Grihadaha* (The Burning of a Home) is perhaps his masterpiece. The hero, in love with his friend's wife, carries her away. Unable to win her consent to live with him, he goes to treat a case of plague and dies of contagion.

In *Charitrahin* (The Immoralists), the most discussed of his novels, rationality is shown in conflict with conventional morality. This was one of the problems with which the author most concerned himself throughout his life.

Prabhat Kumar Mukerjee was a born story-teller. He did not strain after effect, relating his tales with as much directness and simplicity and as much artlessness as he could. Thanks to his never-failing humour they are excellent entertainment though an undercurrent of pathos runs through them. Many of his stories have been translated into Hindi, Marathi and other languages.

Charu Chandra Banerjee, a craftsman whose choice of words was inimitable, was at his best in short stories. Most of his characters were humble folk victimised by society or by fate. Some of his stories also have been translated.

Nirupama Devi is famous for her memorable novel *Didi* (The Elder Sister). The same theme of one woman's surrendering her happiness for that of another recurs in her later novels which, though few, maintain

the same high standard for fiction.

Kedaranath Banerjee is our leading humorist in prose. His novels and short stories are surcharged with tears but he makes a rainbow of laughter across them.

Rajsekhar Bose, better known by his pen-name, "Parasuram," has written a number of humorous stories unforgettable for the whimsical manner of their telling and the absurd characters that they tear out from life.

Suresh Chandra Banerjee has left us a masterpiece in his *Chitrabaha*, a tale of two countries, India and Japan. True to its title, portraits and scenes flow through it.

Naresh Chandra Sengupta, a highly learned advocate, has a liking for pathological, criminological and other such subjects. At his best he is a powerful story-teller.

Surupa Devi, known to the public as Indira Devi, was the author of some notable novels.

The tales of Anurupa Devi are extremely popular though she has a didactic bias which affects their literary value.

Saurindra Mohan Mukherjee of the same family is equally popular as a novelist. Unfortunately he has sacrificed his literary gifts to overproduction.

His friend Hemendra Kumar Ray has followed the same primrose path in juvenile fiction after an initial success as a considerable short-story writer.

Another friend of his, Manilal Ganguli, was a better artist. His stories, though few, were delicately told and often uncanny.

There is another talented family group with which Sarat Chandra Chatterjee served his apprenticeship. Surendranath Ganguli is noted for his fascinating story



*Bairag Yoga*. Upendranath Ganguli knows the art of story-telling as few others do ; he has humour, wit and power to sustain interest.

Sailabala Ghosh has written some remarkable tales which show freedom from prejudice. She has deep sympathy for Mohammedans.

Other important writers of stories were and are Jatindramohan Sinha, Surendranath Majumdar, Bibhuti Bhushan Bhatta, Saroj Kumari Devi and Prabodh Ghosh.

The two most famous names in juvenile fiction were Upendra Kishore Ray Choudhury and Jogindranath Sarkar. Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar is another writer whose folk-tales have been a source of infinite delight to children.

## Chapter XII

### THE PRESENT POSITION

When Bankim wrote, the chief question was how to restore national self-respect. In Rabindranath's time it was how to bridge the gulf between the East and the West. In this dynamic age it is how to identify ourselves with the common people.

Before the nineteenth century the majority of writers lived in the villages, their works were read at the village gatherings, recited, sung and acted. There was no schism between the author and his public. Urbanisation and the printing-press have combined to isolate us. Though our books circulate more widely they are known less intimately. They are accessible only to those among the literate who can borrow or buy them. The illiterate are cut off from the intellectual life of the times as never before, with the result that there has ceased to be an enlightened and forceful public opinion outside the large towns and public taste is being steadily debased. The traditional forms of healthy and educative social entertainment have long since ceased to satisfy the artistic and intellectual needs of the people. They are drifting with none to guide them. The sophisticated city-loving writers are power-

less to do so. They are compelled to content themselves with their coteries. The people play no part in our modern literature. Even the books of Michael and Bankim were not read out to the village folk as Kavikankan's had been. Neither have Tagore's lyrics become common property in the same way as the Vaishnava poems. The situation has grown progressively worse during the course of a century and a half. The time has come when it has got to be faced manfully.

Outwardly we are advancing. There are now two periodicals devoted exclusively to poetry. At numerous theatres in Calcutta Bengali plays are acted nightly by professional players, both men and women. Bengali talkies are showing daily in hundreds of towns, large and small. Bengali magazines go into hundreds. Children's books have multiplied beyond all expectations. Publishing and bookselling concerns have been on the increase. There are many writers who are able to earn something, be it ever so little, with the help of these editors, publishers, booksellers, film-producers, play-house proprietors and gramophone companies. The outlook, from the pecuniary point of view, is not so hopeless as it was before Sarat Chandra appeared on the scene.

In spite of all this, the fundamental schism remains and something seems to have gone out of our literature, something that was still there even twenty years ago. The spirit of disenchantment of the age appears to have infected letters also. The writer does not take the same delight in his writing nor the reader in his reading. Life has grown more serious while art has grown less so. This tendency has been marked since the last Great

War. Although that war meant less to Bengalee writers than to their comrades in the West, it brought about certain changes which sharply affected their social and economic environment. Unemployment rose before our eyes as a frightful spectre. Women came out of their seclusion to study in the colleges and to take jobs. Cinemas, in which men and women were shown together, had a mushroom growth. Slums invaded the towns and the cities and the cry "Back to the village!" died on the lips of those who found that there was hardly any employment to be had in the rural areas. The nationalist movement gradually merged into social revolutionary groups directed as much against the Indian upper classes as against the foreign rulers and traders. Non-violence only prepared the way for violence when the high hopes it raised were not realised. The last Great War divided the past from the present indeed.

The soldier-poet Kazi Nazrul Islam gave voice to the new spirit of a defiant nationalism with the clear insistence of a rebel. His *Vidrohi* (The Rebel) summed up the feelings of his generation. They denied everything, from God down, in order to clear the ground for fresh creation. Mixing with workers and peasants he sought to arouse them too. Later, when communalism raised its ugly head and fouled the atmosphere with its poisonous breath, the poet felt that his voice was gone. He turned to the composing of songs, which absorbs him still.

It is our misfortune that the post-war period, which was so rich in political action, is so poorly mirrored in contemporary literature. One possible explanation may

be censorship but another may be the absence of a political leader with the literary powers of a Barindra Kumar Ghosh or an Upendranath Banerjee. Kazi Nazrul Islam was practically the only exception. Prabhat Mohan Banerjee, Bijaylal Chatterjee and Vivekananda Mukherjee have written some memorable poems and Amalendu Das Gupta and Santi Sudha Ghosh some noteworthy stories recording the spirit of the political revolt ; otherwise this tragic period, unlike the Swadeshi era, remains unsung and unmourned.

Muslim writers, as the mention of Kazi Nazrul Islam shows, have not only fallen into line with the writers of other communities but achieved distinction on their own merit. They have not yet been deeply affected by city life ; living in closer contact with the country folk they have a freshness and a vigour still unspoilt. Their democratic traditions also make them akin to the people.

Asimuddin is more a son of the soil than a child of the age. His long narrative poems of village life are comparable to the *Mymensingh Ballads* in their tragic sense and homely atmosphere if not in their intensity of living. Among present-day poets he is the nearest to the people and heralds a time when the "dumb millions" will find their voice. Mahbubul Alam, author of a remarkable series of reminiscences, is also a lover of the people. He finds such pleasure and peace in their company that he cares nothing for the tinsel that passes for civilisation and deplores its inroads on their nature-wise way of life. Kazi Abdul Wadud, a critic of life as well as of literature, has an integrated view of reality. Serene and self-possessed, he can discourse on religion,

philosophy, politics and social reform with an unbiased understanding that transcends all frontiers. Humayun Kabir, one of the rising intellectuals of Bengal, is also a poet and a critic of note. Abul Mansur Ahmed has thrown himself into political journalism on the side of the peasants. Always an entertaining essayist, he is a brilliant satirist as well. Abu Saiyid Ayub is another young intellectual. His essays are ordinarily on philosophical subjects and he is of the Marxist persuasion. There are two Wazed Ali's, both of them thoughtful essayists. Syed Wazed Ali is in addition a man of taste who gives a personal touch to his writings.

Among other Muslim authors mention should be made of the poets Gholam Mustapha, Abdul Kadir, Mohiuddin and Bande Ali; the essayists Mohammed Shahidulla, Motaher Hussain Chaudhury and Shamsun Nahar, editor of *Bulbul*; and the novelists, Abul Fazl and Mansuruddin. The last-named is better known for his collection of folk-songs.

Another marked feature of the period is the way women writers have come forward and taken their rightful places. They do not ask for privileged consideration but compete on equal terms.

The sisters Santa Devi and Sita Devi were probably the first to portray the college-educated girl and her difficulties in a society governed by custom and blind inhibitions. Some of their first stories are still their best. Nirupama Devi ( Rani ) has shown equal courage in her life and her poetry, preferring hardship and struggle to a comfortable social position and wealth. It is our misfortune that she writes no more. The silence of Sarajubala Sen Gupta ( Das Gupta ) is also unfortunate, for

her philosophical and imaginative writings showed great promise. Uma Devi, in whom a calm reflective vision mastered spiritual unrest, died prematurely after producing poems and stories full of promise. Radharani Devi, another poetess, came into prominence through her impassioned feminism which she has outgrown since her marriage to the well-known writer Narendra Dev. Aparajita Devi, whose identity is still a matter of conjecture, is famous for her light humorous verse with its wistful, half-concealed undertone of sorrow. Prabhavati Devi has made fiction writing her career. As she has not the genius of a Sarat Chandra this has resulted in quantity without a corresponding quality. There is much sadness in her tales and a suggestion of revolt.

I dare not lift the veil that cloaks the mute misery of Bengal's women. A merciless dowry system which deprives many of them of married happiness, paucity of independent careers as alternatives, outworn marriage and inheritance laws, absence of divorce legislation and all sorts of minor restrictions cloud their lives from the cradle. It is therefore no wonder that our women writers are not so much artists as mournful voices with sometimes the desire but rarely the will to rebel. Few have the strength to be feminists and those who have soon tire of it. It is exceedingly rare to meet one who is full of the joy of living. Such an one is Lila Majumdar. Others deserving mention are Jyotirmayi Devi, Sophia Khatun, Suruchibala Ray, Ashalata Sinha and Jyotirmala Devi, brave and questioning spirits, all of them.

The growth of the group habit is the most notable tendency of the era. Nearly every writer belongs to a

small and select coterie. Usually it is connected with a periodical. This trend was noticeable in the preceding period but had not been so marked. Nowadays it has an ideological colouring, for the air is thick with "isms."

One group of writers, associated with the *Kallol* magazine, had some experience of the ugly side of life, the frustrations of the unemployed and unmarried youth, the injustices of the social system and the inhumanity of man. Many of them had no belief in God or religion. Even patriotism did not warm them. They had their dreams of a new kind of society which would be the Utopia of their desire. Apart from this, they were "realists."

Gokul Chandra Nag, who was the soul of this group, died young, leaving behind him a remarkable novel called *Pathik* (The Wayfarer). The author, perhaps aware of his destiny, tried to say everything he had to say in one book. Too many plots and sub-plots are woven into it and the result is unwieldy. Still he succeeded in creating some unforgettable characters against the background of the Non-Co-operation Movement. Achintya Kumar Sengupta and Premendra Mitra, both of them distinguished novelists and short-story writers today, served their apprenticeship with the *Kallol*. Both have also written memorable poems. Achintya is ironical and inclined to cynicism, while Premendra is a broken-hearted dreamer, still hoping for the best from a revolution.

Sailajananda Mukherjee, associated with the *Kali Kalam* magazine, has written many romances, frequently giving them a social significance. Equally



social and romantic is Prabodh Kumar Sanyal of the *Swadesh* magazine group. His stories are thronged with impetuous men and women aflame with passion or consumed by a restless longing for something afar.

The group named after the *Pragati* magazine was led by Buddhadev Bose who now edits *Kavita*, a periodical devoted to verse. Buddhadev is at once a poet, an essayist and a novelist, noted for his brilliance rather than depth. Among the contributors to *Kavita* are the poets Jivanananda Das Gupta, Amiya Chandra Chakravarti and Samar Sen. All of them are original to the point of eccentricity. Ajit Kumar Dutta of the same group has classical tastes. Dissentients from the *Kavita* have formed themselves into another group led by Premendra Mitra and Sanjay Bhattacharya. They have a poetry magazine called *Nirukta*.

Sudhindranath Datta of the *Parichaya* set only began to publish his poems and essays after he was fully mature. He had his apprenticeship and "*Wanderjahre*" in foreign lands; yet his style is severely classical and his diction Sanskritic. In his refusal to be taken in or consoled he reflects exactly the post-war European temper, but he is not an imitator. He pursues values almost to nullity and sees no way out for man except perhaps through a catastrophe. Nearest to him is Vishnu De, though not exactly of the same set. Vishnu is a symbolist whose mind is wavering between T. S. Eliot and Karl Marx. His poems are notable for their music. He in his turn is nearest to Subhas Mukherjee, a whole-hearted communist whose poetry is a call to action.

Philosophical nihilism is also in a way the kernel of

the poems of Sajani Kanta Das, editor of the *Sanibarar Chithi*. With him are associated two or three other powerful writers. Tarasankar Banerjee is perhaps the most popular novelist now writing. Drawn from rural sources, his characters are unmistakably alive and real though appearing at times through a romantic mist. His outlook on life is vigorous, marked by a certain bewilderment at the social changes taking place all about him. Balaichand Mukherjee who writes under the name "Banaphul" is a doctor by profession. The many men and women with whom he is thrown in contact are portrayed in his stories with consummate skill. He is a poet and a playwright of originality. Close contact with so much suffering seems, however, to have had a depressing effect on his spirits. Pramathanath Bishi of this group is equally skilled in prose and verse and play. He bubbles over with wit but the experience that he brings into his works does not greatly impress.

The better known writers of fiction independent of any coterie are Manindralal Bose, Dilip Kumar Ray, Bibhuti Bhusan Banerjee and Manik Banerjee. Manindralal Bose is the spokesman of the young idealists who, as citizens of the world, dreamed of an age when love and beauty and justice should reign supported by the devoted labours of selfless scientific research. His heroes and heroines are, for the most part, artists and scientists whose inevitable destiny is frustration or failure. But they accept life as fundamentally good and beautiful. The musician Dilip Kumar Roy, who spent the post-war years in Europe and made intimate contacts there, is a novelist whose heroes and heroines are cosmopolitans. Disillusionment drove him to Pondicherry where he

regained his soul and recaptured his rapture. He has been writing devotional poetry of a flame-like purity. Bibhuti Bhusan Banerjee leapt into fame as the author of *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Road), the record of a child's unfolding, told with great charm and fidelity. His novels are pervaded with a nostalgia for a vanishing world. His wanderings provide him with endless material for stories. Manik Banerjee is an enigma. He has seen things, pleasant and unpleasant, at close quarters. His imagination transforms it all into a dream-like stuff that invests ordinary characters with a strangeness that fascinates and frightens by its weird quality.

Of the independent poets Sudhir Kumar Chaudhury, Hemendralal Ray, Hemchandra Bagchi, Manish Ghatak and Nishikanta Ray Choudhury are the better known. They have feeling and imagination but are not so fertile in ideas as some of the group poets. Hemendralal died in his prime.

The times are rich in writers who have to their credit something in verse or prose. Unless I turn this essay into a catalogue I cannot enumerate all of them. Let me mention only a few to illustrate the wealth and the variety of our literary life today.

Irresistible humorists are Bibhuti Bhusan Mukherjee and Sivaram Chakravarti. Both write stories, the latter chiefly for children. Another was Rabindranath Maitra who might have matured into a delightful dramatist.

Among the playwrights whose works have literary value are Sachindranath Sen Gupta and Jogesh Chandra Chaudhury. The former has social ideas and might do

better if the stage which pays its pipers did not call the tune. We console ourselves with the thought that we at least have a professional theatre though it lags sadly behind our literature.

✓ In the world of short stories, an expanding universe, many are the planets and stars and comets. Jagadish Gupta, Asamanja Mukherjee, Ashis Gupta, Manoj Bose, Gajendra Kumar Mitra and Subodh Ghosh should not pass unnoticed. The stories of the last named have social significance and of the first, sensuous appeal. Rakhal Chandra Sen has given us some extraordinary stories. Kiran Sankar Ray has left off writing. His stories had an exceptional interest.

✓ Novels have become human nature's daily food. In this essential industry are engaged many professionals of whom some have literary aspirations as well. On the other hand, many who began as artists have turned commercial. Among those who have escaped this fate mention must be made of Premankur Atarshi, Narendra Dev, Saroj Kumar Ray Choudhury and Jivanmay Ray, who are all excellent writers in their own way.

The essay has suffered by comparison with the previous period as many capable essayists have neglected it for either fiction or journalism, these being better paid. Worthy of note are Charuchandra Datta, Satyendranath Majumdar, Prabodh Chatterjee, Prafulla Kumar Sarkar, Abaninath Ray, Hiran Kumar Sanyal, Shyamal Krishna Ghosh, Nandagopal Sen Gupta, Gopal Haldar and Jyotirmay Ray. Charuchandra's reminiscences are a rich repast.

Before I conclude I should like to apologise to those writers whom I have omitted or underrated. They will

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Before I conclude I should like to apologise to those writers whom I have omitted or underrated. They will

find themselves in good company when they think of Swami Vivekananda, Bipin Chandra Pal, Chittaranjan Das, Aurobindo Ghose and many other men and women who have enriched our literature, both past and present.

# ANTHOLOGY

i.—POETRY

ii.—PROSE

TRANSLATIONS BY LILA RAY



## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

These translations have been made in accordance with the principles followed by Arthur Waley in his *The Book of Songs*, translated from the Chinese.

## POETRY

RADHA TO KRISHNA

( From the *Padavali* )

Love, what more can I say ?  
In death, in life, in birth after birth,  
Be the lord of my life.  
Your feet to my heart  
Love's knot has tied.  
Forsaking all with all my heart  
I became your slave.  
I had thought in the three worlds  
I had others too,  
But where none asks after Radha  
To whom may I turn ?  
I took refuge in the coolness  
Of your lotus feet.  
Do not betray me, a trusting woman, falsely,  
Do what you ought.  
I have realised that without my lord  
There is no hope for me.  
For an instant if I do not see you  
My heart dies within me.  
Chandidas says ( you are ) the philosopher's stone  
I wear about my neck.

CHANDIDAS

## RADHA TO HER FRIEND

( From the *Padavali* )

My eyes sorrow for his beauty, his goodness fills  
my thoughts.

Every part of me cries out for every part of him.

My heart longs for the touch of his heart.

The life in me yearns restlessly for love.

What more shall I tell you, Friend ?

I will remember all the good I have ever done.

How can I describe the happiness it is to see him ?

How eager am I to touch and caress him !

Honey flows from his smile.

Love falls like cream from his light laughter.

Among my elders and companions as I dwell,

Any mention of Shyama\* swells my heart with joy.

I try to hide it in all sorts of ways,

But my eyes fill with tears continually.

Everyone in the house whispers about me.

Jnan says, I have set fire to my shame.

JNANDAS

---

\* Krishna

## SRIMANTA DISCOVERS HIS FATHER

( An extract from the *Chandi Mangal* )

[ Srimanta, according to the royal custom on state occasions, grants an amnesty to a number of prisoners on the celebration of his marriage to the Princess of Ceylon. He goes personally to search through the dungeons for his father, to rescue whom he has come from Ujani. Here the son is questioning his father to make sure of his identity before making himself known to him. ]

( The father says : )

“ A prisoner twelve years, a prisoner twelve years,  
Three months’ journey from the city of Ujani. ”

( The son : )

“ Ujani is many a day’s journey.

What brought you to Ceylon, O Prisoner ?

Tell me frankly, Prisoner, what was your intention ?

Why have you been imprisoned twelve years ?

Tell me your story. Oh, tell me your story.

It saddens me to hear of your sorrows. ”

( The father : )

“ In the King’s storehouses were neither yak-tail fans  
nor sandal.

This was the reason I came to the southland.

At Kalidaha upon a hundred-petalled lotus sat a  
beautiful woman.

Quickly she swallowed an elephant whole and quickly  
spewed it out again.

I told the King what I had seen. Straightway a wager  
was made ;  
For the loser strict confinement in the dungeon.”

( The son : )

“ My good man, if fate has made you a prisoner  
Why has your son not come to look for you ? ”

( The father : )

“ My fathers-in-law, uncles and friends have no pity.  
I know not how my two wives manage to live. ”

( The son : )

“ Tell me truly, O Prisoner, tell me truly,  
Why your King does not search for you. ”

( The father : )

“ I am unlucky, Prince, and where shall I get a son ?  
My fathers-in-law, uncles and friends do not care  
for me.  
What can two weak women easily do ?  
It is my misfortune the King has no mercy on me.  
What are you asking, Sir, what are you asking ?  
You, full of compassion, are my fathers-in-law, uncles  
and friends. ”

( The son : )

“ If you have neither son nor daughter  
How do your wives live with nothing to look forward  
to ?

---

\* The man lost the wager as the Goddess Chandi who was  
the “ beautiful woman ” intended that he should suffer. She  
vanished before the King came.

How did you dare to come away, O Prisoner ?  
How could you leave young wives all alone ?  
Tell me the particulars, O Prisoner, tell me the  
particulars,  
Why did you obey the King's command to come to  
Ceylon ?

( The father : )

“ My first wife has no children.  
My second wife was with child.  
When she was six months gone  
By the order of the King my long absence began.  
I know not even whether a son or a daughter was born.”

( The poet : )

As he spoke tears fell from the prisoner's eyes.

( The father : )

“ All are women at home, only women.  
And an old maid servant named Durbala. ”

KAVIKANKAN MUKUNDARAM CHAKRAVARTI

#### THE POET'S WIFE

( An extract from *Vidya Sundar* )

Hearing them find fault with their husbands up spoke  
a faithful wife :

“ Listen to me, women, my trouble is greater.  
An eminent poet is my husband. So full he is of wit  
Unpleasantness he turns to pleasantry.

Clothes he cannot give me nor can he give me rice.  
He thatches the roof and repairs the walls with his verses.  
Conch bracelets have I never worn, nor gold, nor  
coloured saris.  
By virtue of his words alone he is master of love."

BHARAT CHANDRA RAY

HYMN TO KALI AS THE GODDESS TARA (SAVIOUR)

Will the day ever come  
When tears will flood my eyes  
As I utter Thy Name, Tara ?  
Then the lotus of my heart will blossom,  
The darkness of my mind be dispelled.  
Calling Tara with my last breath  
I will cast myself down and die.  
The cravings of my heart dispersed,  
I will forswear all dissensions.  
True are the Vedas a hundred times over,  
Formless is my Tara. In all things  
She presides as Mother, declares Ram Prasad.  
Blind One, behold the Mother !  
In darkness she dissipates the dark.

RAM PRASAD SEN

A BAUL SONG

Temples and mosques conceal the way to Thee ;  
O Lord, I hear Thy call and cannot come.  
Barring my path stand the Gurus and Mursheds.  
If that which cools the body plunged in it

Sets the world on fire  
Tell me, Lord, where am I to take my stand ?  
All striving for Unity dies in dissension ;  
Many are the locks on Thy door—  
The Puran, the Koran, the Hindu and Muslim  
rosaries—  
Most vexing of all is the ascetic's garb.  
Madan laments in sorrow.

MADAN BAUL

FOLK POEM

“ O Charmer, what fun ! O Charmer, what fun !  
Name four black things and I will go with you.”  
“ The crow is black, the cuckoo's black, black is the  
phinga bird,  
But blacker than all, girl, is the hair of your head. ”

“ O Charmer, what fun ! O Charmer, what fun !  
Name four white things and I will go with you.”  
“ The heron is white, clothes are white, white is the  
swan,  
But whiter than all, girl, is the conch bangle on your  
arm. ”

“ O Charmer, what fun ! O Charmer, what fun !  
Name four red things and I will go with you.”  
“ The China-rose is red, oleanders are red, red is the  
safflower,  
Redder than all, girl, is the vermilion in the parting of  
your hair. ”\*

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\* Worn by married women in Bengal.



“ O Charmer, what fun ! O Charmer, what fun !  
Name four bitter things and I will go with you. ”  
“ Neem is bitter, ‘ *nisundhe* ’ is bitter, bitter is the  
colocynth,  
But bitterest of all, girl, is the house of a co-wife. ”

“ O Charmer, what fun ! O Charmer, what fun !  
Name four cool things and I will go with you. ”  
“ Cool is water, cool is earth, cool is a mat made of  
reeds,  
But coolest of all, girl, is the coolness of your chest. ”

ANONYMOUS

#### MALUA'S FAREWELL

( An extract from the *Mymensingh Ballads* )

[ Malua, a happy young wife, attracted the attention of the local Kazi by her beauty. She was abducted and, though she was rescued while still pure, her relatives doubted her chastity. Her husband left her and married again. Malua remained in his house as a servant. When he was taken for dead of snake-bite she restored his life by exorcism. Her reward was more mistrust. How could a chaste woman successfully practise witchcraft ? ]

The boat, “ Wind of the Heart,” was tied at the landing.  
At noon the young woman stepped into it.  
Water bubbled up in the leaky vessel.  
“ Oh, I know not how far away is the home of the dead !  
Rise, water, higher over the wood of the boat ! ”

Binod's sister ran to the landing by the water ;  
" Hear me, hear me, bride. Dear, let me explain to you.  
Leave that leaky boat and come home. "

" I'll not go home again, do you hear, sister-in-law ?  
The sight of you all is breaking my heart.  
Rise, rise, rise, water ! Sink, leaky boat !  
Come, look at Malua for the last time in this life. "

With dishevelled hair her mother-in-law came running.  
Heedless of her clothes she was like a mad woman.  
" Hear me, dear bride-after-my-heart, let me explain to  
you.  
My good wife, come back to the house.  
Lamp of a dark home, moonlight in a fallen house,  
Without you I will not live a single day or night. "

" Rise, rise, rise, water ! Sink, leaky boat !  
Bid me farewell, mother, I fall at your feet. "

The rising water murmured in the leaky vessel.  
It was half under. Her mother-in-law wept on the shore.  
One by one her brothers came running.  
Of relatives and friends there was no counting.  
The five brothers shouted to their golden sister :  
" O Sister, what is the good of getting in that leaky boat ?  
Tell us truly if you want to go to our father's house.  
We five brothers will take you in a boat of gold. "

" I will not go, I will not go to my father's house again.  
Malua, the beautiful, begs leave of her brothers.  
Rise, rise, rise, water ! Sink, leaky boat !  
Go back to your homes and leave Malua. "

The water rose over the vessel. It was sinking.  
“ Come quick, Chand Binod, if you wish to see her. ”

Running up, Chand Binod stood upon the shore.  
“ The star of my eyes is drowning like this ! Oh,  
Let the sun and moon drown, I have no use for the world !  
Of relatives and friends no more have I need.  
If you must drown, girl, take me with you.  
Look me in the face once and tell me your trouble.  
I will take you home whatever people say.  
Do not drown, girl, for the sake of dharma ! ”

“ My days are over. Nothing is left to me.  
Why should I stay longer ? For what should I work ?  
As long as I live you will be shamed.  
All will blame you, people, relatives and friends.  
I will sink my disgrace in the sea.  
Go away from here, my husband, go back to the house.  
There is a pretty woman there, think of her.  
Live with her in happiness.  
Rise, rise, rise, water ! Sink, leaky boat !  
Leave this unfortunate and go home.  
Let water cover the boat in the lap of the sea. ”

The girl shouted to her relatives and friends and the people :

“ Those guilty of greater crimes go free,  
While fault is found with everything I do.  
Fate ordained I should suffer ; so it must be.  
My husband is guilty of no wrong.  
Hear me, dear mother-in-law, my mother in a hundred  
lives,  
From where I am I fall at your feet.”

Calling her co-wife Malua said :  
“Live in happiness with your husband.  
From today you will see Malua no more.  
Look at him and forget your grief for me. ”

A storm rose in the east and it thundered.  
Of this sea there was no shore, no ferry-man at the  
ferry.

“ Sink, sink, sink, boat ! How much farther ?  
Drowning I shall know how far is the home of the  
dead. ”

It thundered in the east and a terrible wind blew.  
Where is the lovely girl in the “ Wind of the Heart ? ”

ANONYMOUS

#### THE POET'S RETURN TO HIS MOTHER-TONGUE

( From the *Chaturdashpadi Kavita* )

Bengal ! many are the jewels in your treasury.  
Unfeeling that I was, I disregarded them all.  
Crazed with lust for foreign wealth I travelled  
In foreign lands, in an unlucky moment assuming a  
beggar's rôle.

Happiness forsworn, many are the days I passed  
Sleepless and hungry, abandoning mind and body.  
Absorbed in fruitless endeavour, worshipping false gods,  
Forgetful of the lotus pond I dawdled in the lichen  
forest.

In a dream the genius of your race spoke then—  
“ O my child, in your mother’s lap lie heaps of gems.  
Why are you poor as a beggar today ?  
Go back, you unknowing boy, go to your home ! ”  
Contentedly I obeyed her behest ; in time I was given  
A mine full of precious stones in the shape of my  
mother-tongue.

MICHAEL MADHUSUDAN DUTT

ON THE DEATH OF HIS WIFE

( From *Smaran* )

Love came and, opening the door, she went away.  
She will never come again.

The visit of one more guest only remains,  
He who will be my last acquaintance.

He will come and put out the lamp one day.  
Lifting me into his car

He will take me from home to the homeless  
Path of planets and stars.

Until then I shall stay sitting alone with the door open ;  
I will finish my work.

When the day of the other guest’s coming is here  
He will not be hindered in the least.

The preparations for the sacred service will be complete  
one day ;

I will remain in readiness.

Silently holding out my arms I will take to my heart  
That homeless guest.

She who departed today through the open door  
    Called to me as she left,

‘Wipe your tears, there is one more guest  
    To come yet.’

She said, “Finish making your garland some day ;  
    Pluck out life’s thorns.

To the new home bring with you, O Homeless One,  
    Your completed necklace of flowers.”

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

ON HER SON’S BIRTHDAY

( From poems on the death of her son )

Come, dear, this morning, to take your mother’s blessing.  
More-than-life, today is your birthday.  
Sixteen years completed, in the full-moon beauty of  
young manhood,  
Stand beside me, Son, Friend. Let the bitterness of night  
Merge into the light of dawn. The taste of motherhood  
You gave this life has so filled me with its richness  
I have forgotten sorrow. Come, my own,  
My son for always, my joy without end.

I did not trouble God, saying,  
You gave and took away.” The few days  
You lived were unsurpassed in good fortune.  
You were and you are, every day and always  
I will have you, my son. What cruel suffering it is  
To long for an absent child !

KAMINI RAY

## THE SONG OF EQUALITY

( An extract from the poem “ Samya Sama ” )

Awake, awake, Humanity ! The call has come today !  
Tear the servant's dress from your mighty body.

Why bend you still the knee, silently, head down ?  
Astraddle your shoulders and back who hurts you ?

Who has deafened you, clashing cymbals in your ears ?  
Who prods your flesh with elephant goads, causing blood  
to flow ?

With bent knee and lowered head why are you silent ?  
Alas !  
Get up and stand, let the hateful worms fall at your feet.

Standing again with lifted head smile your flashing smile,  
Holding each the other's hand, philosopher, saint,  
warrior, artist, cowherd and farmer.

Delivering from the fear of bondage a new message has  
come to the world,  
Together men and women sing the great new song of  
equality.

“ We acknowledge not fanciful man-made difficulties.  
We acknowledge not the luxury-bred ass on horseback..

We acknowledge not church, convent or temple, Kalki  
or prophet.

---

Our God is the god of equality and his dwelling is within us.

Humanity is our King ; for his service we have fashioned  
Our lives through a hundredfold vigilance.

Hope is an infant in the confinement room ;  
For her the arms of the world labour silently.

We know pressure of wealth gives birth to sin.  
We know compassion is more powerful than punishment.

We want not to destroy the guilty, we would make  
them men.

We blame not the afflicted as sinners in a former birth.

We know the heart of a child is his in whose arms  
it smiles ;  
The land is his through whose loving care it is fruitful.

We acknowledge not other laws or dispensations. We  
acknowledge not other customs.

We acknowledge not those who have made of the world  
a sad prison.

We know the worth of love, we know the value of  
wisdom.

We acknowledge power when it ministers to  
well-being...."



## THE TRAVELLER

(An extract from the poem "Pantha" or "The Traveller")

Travelling an endless road I come and go in the car of the flesh—

The river of life flows ceaselessly past the cremation ground on its shore,

And the lapping of its murmuring waters is audible always,

Sometimes in sunshine, sometimes in moonlight, sometimes cloaked in darkness !

The lamp shines, shadows sway, and the waves are beyond counting !

I float by beneath the banks, behold, and beholding, forget !

As I stare at the stars in the still night sleep nods into my eyes.

What is the good of remembering from where I come or where I go ?

To be in motion is itself happiness. With me move the planets and stars !

I am afraid lest, stopping, with numbed and motionless feet

I slip beyond the horizon, lost to my sunrises and sunsets.

Were I to lose myself ! Were I to die an eternal death !

Were I to suffer no more—should my tears cease to flow !

O tell me, Sannyasi,\* I will never be deprived of this sensibility irrevocably.

MOHITLAL MAJUMDAR

---

\* Schopenhauer. The poem is addressed to him throughout. The poet here calls him an ascetic.

## THE REBEL

(An extract from the poem "Vidrohi" or "The Rebel")

Hero ! Say,  
Say, " My head is high !  
The Himalayan peaks bow their heads on seeing mine !"  
Say, Hero—  
Say, " Rending the great sky of the great world,  
Passing sun, moon, planets and stars,  
Piercing both heaven and earth,  
Cleaving the throne of God,  
Have I risen—I, the eternal wonder  
Of the Lord of Creation !  
On my brow burns Siva's eye—the royal mark of  
victory ! "

Hero ! Say,  
" High is my head always !  
I am uncontrollable, insolent, cruel,  
I am the Dancer of Doom, the Cyclone, Destruction,  
I am Terror, I am the curse of the world, I am  
irresistible,  
Everything do I smash to dust !  
I trample underfoot all bonds, all laws, all orderliness !  
No law do I acknowledge,  
I sink fully the full boat, I am the torpedo, the terrible  
floating mine !  
I am Siva the Destroyer, in my loose hair I bring  
The untimely Northwester !

I am the rebel, the rebel son  
Of the Lord of Creation !”  
Say, Hero—  
“ High is my head always ! ”

KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM

## PROSE

### THE BRIDE'S ARRIVAL

( An extract from *Devi Choudhurani*, Part III )

No sooner had Prafulla's boat put in at Bhutnath landing than the news spread through the village that Brajeswar had again brought home a wife ; it was whispered she was full-grown, even old. People came running from all directions to see the bride, the young, the old, the blind, the lame, everybody. The cook left her pots and ran ; the cutter of fish turned her basket upside down over her fish and ran ; the bather came running in wet clothes. The diner went half-hungry. The disputer suddenly agreed with her opponent. The woman spanking her child spared him for once. Off he went in his mother's arms to see the old bride. When the news came a husband was eating. The curry and dhal had been served but not the fish ; he had to do without fish that day. An old woman complained to her granddaughter, " How can I go to the pond unless you take me ? " At the news of the bride's coming the girl abandoned the old woman and dashed off. The old woman managed somehow to get there too. A young woman, having just been scolded by her mother, was

promising not to leave the house again when she heard the news. Her promise was at once forgotten ; away she went towards the bride's house. A mother left her baby and ran ; the baby toddled after her, crying. A young wife veiled her face and passed shamelessly in front of her seated husband and his elder brother. Running loosened the young women's clothes but they had no time to set them right. Their hair fell down but they did not stop to twist it up again. In their excitement they did not notice what they pulled where. There was an uproar. The goddess of modesty fled in shame.

The bride and bridegroom were standing on a low stool while his mother went through the formalities of reception. People leaned forward to get a look at the bride. She did not relax proprieties and kept her veil three-fourths of a yard long. No one could see her face. During the ceremony her mother-in-law raised the veil once to look at her. She started a little but said nothing, merely murmuring, " The bride is nice." There were tears in her eyes.

The reception over, her mother-in-law took the bride to her room and then addressed the assembled neighbours : " Mothers ! My son's wife has come a long way. She is hungry and thirsty. I am going to give them their food immediately. Our daughter-in-law will stay here in our house. You will see her all the time. Go home now and take your own meals."

Disappointed, the village women went away finding fault. The offence was the mother-in-law's but the bride got most of the blame because no one had seen her face. They all expressed their disgust at an old

bride. Again they all opined that such were to be found in Kulin families. Then whoever had seen an old bride in a Kulin home began to tell about it. Govinda Mukerjee had married a woman fifty-five years old. Hari Chatterjee had brought a seventy-year-old maiden wife home. Manu Banerjee married an old woman after she had been brought down to the bank of the Ganges to die. All such tales with embellishments grew familiar on the way. Venting itself in this fashion, the village gradually grew quiet.

BANKIM CHANDRA CHATTERJEE

## ON IMMORTALITY

(Extract from an essay, "Kathar Katha")

This much may be said for certain, whatever may have been the source of literature, it was not the desire to be immortal. In the first place we are not all able to bear the responsibility of immortality but the fingers of many of us itch to push the pen. Consider how few would dare to open their mouths or lift their hands if there were the slightest probability that every word, good, bad or indifferent, and every work would last for ever. Confronted with the bogey of immortality I for one would be unwilling to say anything or do anything that was not perfect. And we all know in our hearts that our best words and our best works fall far short of perfection. The fact is that life is sweet because of death. The gods in their immortal mansions dwell there happily only because there is the possibility

of returning to the mortal world when the stock of their accumulated merit is spent. Else heaven itself would be unendurable. However, we are mortals, not gods, and the desire that our voices be divine is not natural to us.

In the second place, whoever makes the difficult resolve to write for immortality will, if he is intelligent, abandon it quickly enough when he comes to understand how little chance there is of his desire being fulfilled. For we all know the muse of nine hundred and ninety-nine out of a thousand authors gives birth to still-born offspring. In the realm of literature mortality is high the year round. One in a hundred thousand survives and the lives of the rest are brief. Charak, the ancient physician, advised us to flee countries afflicted with fatal epidemics. Who would enter there in the hope of being immortal?

PRAMATHA CHOUDHURY

## THE ABSENT-MINDED HUSBAND

(An extract from *Niskriti*, Chapter VII)

[After a quarrel between the wives of the three brothers, Saila, the youngest, is about to leave the joint family. Siddheswari, the eldest, comes to tell her husband. Nayantara is the second brother's wife.]

In Siddheswari's character there was a fatal flaw—her trust was spineless. The firm confidence of one day wavered on the next for the slightest of reasons. She had always believed in Saila absolutely but, when Nayantara gave her to understand otherwise, within

a few days she began to suspect it was true that Saila had money. And it was not difficult for her to guess the source of it! Still she knew that Saila would scarcely dare to set up a separate household with her husband and children in this part of the city.

That night the head of the family, wearing his spectacles, was sitting under the gas-light in the outer room engrossed in going through the briefs of his pressing cases when Siddheswari entered and went straight to the point. "Can you tell me what is the good of your working?" she said. "Are you going to kill yourself slaving day and night just to feed a pack of pigs?"

Girish, I presume, heard only something about food. Without raising his head he replied, "No, not much longer. As soon as I've seen this bit we'll go to eat."

With annoyance Siddheswari answered, "Who said anything about eating? I am telling you that Saila, now she's done very well by herself, is getting ready to go away. Have you heard that all you've done for them all these years has been wasted?"

Girish roused himself somewhat. "Yes, of course I've heard. Tell Saila to do well by herself. Who's going with her? Tell Moni...." The unfinished sentence was lost among his papers.

Siddheswari cried angrily, "Won't you listen to a single word I say? I tell you one thing and you answer another! Saila is leaving the house!"

Startled by the scolding Girish asked, "Where is she going?"

Siddheswari replied in the same loud voice, "Where is she going? How do I know?"

Girish said, "Then take down her address."



Siddheswari, hurt, resentful, almost beside herself, struck her forehead and screamed, "Oh, what irony! I am to go and take down their address! If such were not my luck I would not have fallen into your hands. Why didn't my mother and father tie me hand and foot and throw me into the Ganges?" She began to cry as she spoke. Discovering after thirty-three years that her parents had given her into unworthy keeping, her remorse and indignation at the misfortune knew no bounds. She went on, "If you shut your eyes now, I'll have to support myself working as a servant-girl for somebody, and I'll have to do it. Oh, I know it very well. What will happen to my Moni and Hari! No—" The tears that Siddheswari had so far suppressed broke loose and nearly washed her eyes away.

His pressing cases vanished from Girish's thoughts. Driven wild by his wife's sudden loud weeping he called in a deep, wrathful voice, "Hari!"

Hari was studying in the next room. He came running anxiously.

Girish rated him furiously. "If you quarrel again," he said, "I'll break a horse-whip across your back. You rascal, you, having nothing to do with your lessons! You are playing and quarrelling day and night. Where is Moni?"

The boys did not know what it was to be rebuked by their father. Hari, frightened out of his senses, replied, "I don't know."

"You don't know, eh? You think I'm not up to your tricks? I notice everything, do you know that? Who is teaching you? Call him."

Hari mumbled, "Dhiren Babu, the Third Form

master, comes to tutor us in the morning.”

“Why in the morning?” Girish demanded. “Tell me why he doesn’t come to teach you at night? I don’t want such a tutor. From tomorrow you are to have someone else! Go and study! Put your mind on it, you rascal, you rogue!”

Hari, pale and shrunken, glanced once at his mother and left the room.

Girish looked towards his wife and said, “You see what sort tutors are nowadays? They take your money and do nothing. Tell Romesh to see that this fellow is dismissed tomorrow and another engaged. He thought he could fool me and get away with it.”

Siddheswari said not a word. Red-eyed with rage she gave her husband a fierce look and silently went out. And Girish, thinking that he had performed his duty handsomely, went happily back to his papers and was instantly absorbed in them.

SARAT CHANDRA CHATTERJEE

## SUKANTA

( An extract from the short story of the same name )

Since early morning there has been great commotion in the house next door. They are leaving today.

Last night after supper Satish and his sister came over. We talked till very late. Satish and I did most of the talking. She sat silently in a corner. With a smile I said to her, “Sing me a last song. I shall not hear another. Let me hear my life’s last song.” Any other day my speaking in that strain would have anger-

ed her and she would have protested. Last night she said nothing and sang in a strained voice. I asked her if she had caught cold. She answered slowly, " I don't know. My voice seems to have got hoarse. " As they left she said, " You must write to Dada\* regularly and let us know how you are. It will be most unfair if you do not. You will get well surely and when you come to Calcutta I shall be angry if you do not come to see us. "

I answered lightly, " You will get my letters for a little while. Then no more."

" Why ? " she asked.

" Because there is no mail service between here and there," I said. She dropped her head and quietly left the room.

She stood beside her window gazing towards mine far into the night. When it struck twelve I remarked, " You will get a chill. Your voice is hoarse already. "

" You are still awake ? " she said and moved slowly away.

Unhesitatingly I have spoken of much but one thing I have been unable to say. I have been on the verge of doing so many times but I cannot decide whether it is true or not. As I look towards that house I wonder if I might not yet say it ; there is time. I love. Is it really love ? Of the nature of the feeling, of its kind, I am ignorant. I do not know whether I love her or not. But might I not tell her, " I have liked you exceedingly. The look in your eyes, the skill of your hands and your voice have given me great happiness ? "

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\* " Dada " means elder brother. Her elder brother is Satish.

I had worked out two possible plots for my life. The first was, after taking my M. Sc. degree here and a Ph. D. from some German University, to become either a professor or a chemist in some manufacturing concern. I planned to devote my life to the finding of new paths and the making of new experiments. The second possibility was to die of t. b. like my mother. It is being realised. Nowhere in either scheme of things was there a place for this girl. Unanticipated she came to me from nowhere. How can she go away? How can it be that she is going away? I have never thought much about marriage. At home there was no one to urge me to marry. The fear of infecting a family with tuberculosis also drove me to repress the thought. Who knows what will happen if I tell her? The idea keeps pricking at me like a thorn. That the right to marry is not mine I know very well. So the words on the tip of my tongue remain unspoken. Yet I wonder if I might not tell her; there is still time. She will be coming now. I remember hearing of a Brahmo girl who, when the boy she loved was taken with t. b., insisted upon marrying him just the same and succeeded in curing him with her devoted care. I also was getting better, my temperature had dropped considerably. Given her love and care I can get well. But there is that young man from America. He has health, money and a bright future.

Perhaps I have misunderstood the whole thing. With my weakening sight I have beheld only my dreams. All the singing and all the talk—perhaps it is only the conventional polite code of the Brahmos. Perhaps they treat everyone the same way, as one of

themselves. What if I am wrong? If being wrong has brought me a little happiness during my last days why should I correct myself?

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The hired carriage, piled with luggage, went away down the red road in front of the house. Khuku and Bulu hung out of the window and waved their handkerchiefs. I also waved to them. As she got into the carriage she said with a forced smile, "I could not come to see you again in the rush. Don't forget to write to Dada." Satish also said something but I did not catch it. Sending the red dust flying the carriage rolled away. Khuku and Bulu kept looking back at my house but she stared towards the maidan. I had expected her to find a minute for me sometime during the morning. When the packing was finished and they had had their meal I saw her start to come over. And I heard her footstep on the stairs as well. Half-way up the sound of it grew soft, then ceased, and a little later, softer still, it died away altogether. Afterwards I watched her returning whence she came. She did not look up at my window. Burying her face in her handkerchief she turned her head away, towards the paddy field.

The carriage disappeared down the road, like a little bird against the sky.

MANINDRALAL BOSE

## ON REALISM

( An extract from *Nava Parjay* )

Young people in Bengal are well acquainted with the word "realism." Yet it seems to me they wilfully

distort its meaning. Death confronts us at every step but death is not real ; what is real is that life goes on in spite of death. Likewise man encounters illusions and weaknesses again and again. These also are not real ; what is real is that through effort man can attain true humanity. If the unhealthy, disorganised, shattered life of our country were to be taken for the real thing all research in art and life would be superseded by experiments in nasal wailing.

Putting a spirited horse into a dilapidated stable makes for difficulties similar to those created by the new humanity and renewed vitality of the Bengalees in Bengali society. The time is past when the horse could be turned out in order to preserve the tottering structure.

Vain is this uneasiness, this sense of grievance. It is our good fortune that the literature of today, "with a sword in one hand and a garland in the other,"\* has not come to confuse us. Its power to make real, healthy and beautiful all aspects of our life, individual, social, national and spiritual, is sure. So if it claims unhesitating self-surrender from its writers it certainly claims nothing unduly.

KAZI ABDUL WADUD

## THE WOOD GODDESS

( From *Pather Panchali*, Chapter XI )

A few feet from the window of their room was the outer wall. And what a jungle began on the other side

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\* Quotation from Tagore.

of it, brushing up against the wall itself ! Sitting at the window all one could see were the heads of the arum bushes, like the waves of a green sea. Vines swung from this tree and that. Wagtails danced on the breast of black earth beneath an old bamboo clump where its tip, weighed down with years, leaned over the *sondali* and *chalta* bushes. Under the larger plants a thick green undergrowth of turmeric, *kochu* and wild arum pushed up in a desperate effort to turn their faces sunward. The leaves of the plants overpowered and overshadowed by their arrogantly shining neighbours in this struggle for life were faded ; their stalks, pale with death, were giving way. And before their mortally wounded gaze the brimming mellow light of late autumn filled the forest. The earth, sweet with the bewilderingly tender scent of the flowering creepers, with all its loveliness, mystery and lavishness, slowly vanished from sight.

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There was an old lake somewhere in the wood with the ruins of a temple beside it. At one time the goddess of the temple, Vishalakshi, had been the village deity even as Panchanan Thakur was then. She had been set up by the Majumdar family. Once, particularly desirous of something or other, they had offered human sacrifice in her temple. The goddess was angry and informed them through a dream that she was going away never to return. It was all long ago and no one living had seen the goddess worshipped. The temple had fallen into ruins, the lake in front of it silted up and become a puddle with jungle thatching its banks. Neither was there any one left in the Majumdar family

to light a lamp.

Only once, also long ago, when Swarup Chakravarti was returning from a feast in another village, he saw a beautiful sixteen-year-old girl standing beside the road as he came down to the river landing at evening. The place was far from human habitation, evening was already passing, and there was no one on the road. Swarup Chakravarti was astonished to see a young and beautiful girl on the edge of a lonely wood at that time of day. But before he could say anything the girl, in a sweet voice tinged with pride, said, "I am Vishalakshi, the goddess of this village. There will be an epidemic of cholera soon. Tell the people to sacrifice one hundred and eight pumpkins to Kali at Panchanan Thakur's on the night of the fourteenth phase of the moon." Even as she finished speaking, before the very eyes of the dumbfounded Swarup, the girl slowly disappeared, melting away into the mist gathering in the winter dusk. Some days later a terrible epidemic really did break out in the village.

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The goddess has not forgotten the village even now.

Late at night, when the village is still, she wanders about the forest making flowers blossom, looking after feathered children and in the last hours of moonlit nights she fills the combs of little bees with the sweet honey of wild *bhaora*, *natkan* and jasmine flowers.

She knows in which corner of which thicket the *basak* flowers hide their heads, where the clusters of *chhatim* blossoms lie in some tree's shade within the secret woods, at which bend of the Ichamati River the *kalami* crowd their blue petals through crevices in the green



moss, and where the tailor-bird's babies waken in their small nest among the foliage of some thorn tree.

The forest seems full of the cool light of her beauty. In its silence, moonlight, scent, and the magic of indistinct light and shade she is the wondrous loveliness of the night.

But before the day flowers the goddess of the wood vanishes away. No one since Swarup Chakravarti has ever seen her.

BIBHUTI BHUSAN BANERJEE

## SUGGESTED READING LIST

[ Below we print a list of books which the reader may be interested to consult. ]

( i ) Some Bengali works available in English translation :—

1. *Vaishnava Lyrics*: By KUMAR, DATTA and CHAPMAN. ( Oxford University Press )
2. *Bengali Religious Lyrics: Sakta*. By THOMPSON and SPENCER. ( Oxford University Press )
3. *Three Episodes from the Old Bengali Poem Chandi*. By E. B. COWELL. ( Asiatic Society of Bengal )
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- (ii) Some English books on Bengali Language and Literature.
1. *History of Bengali Language and Literature*. By DINESH CHANDRA SEN. (Calcutta University)
  2. *Bengali Self-Taught*. By SUNITI KUMAR CHATTERJEE. (E. Marlborough and Co., Ltd.)

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